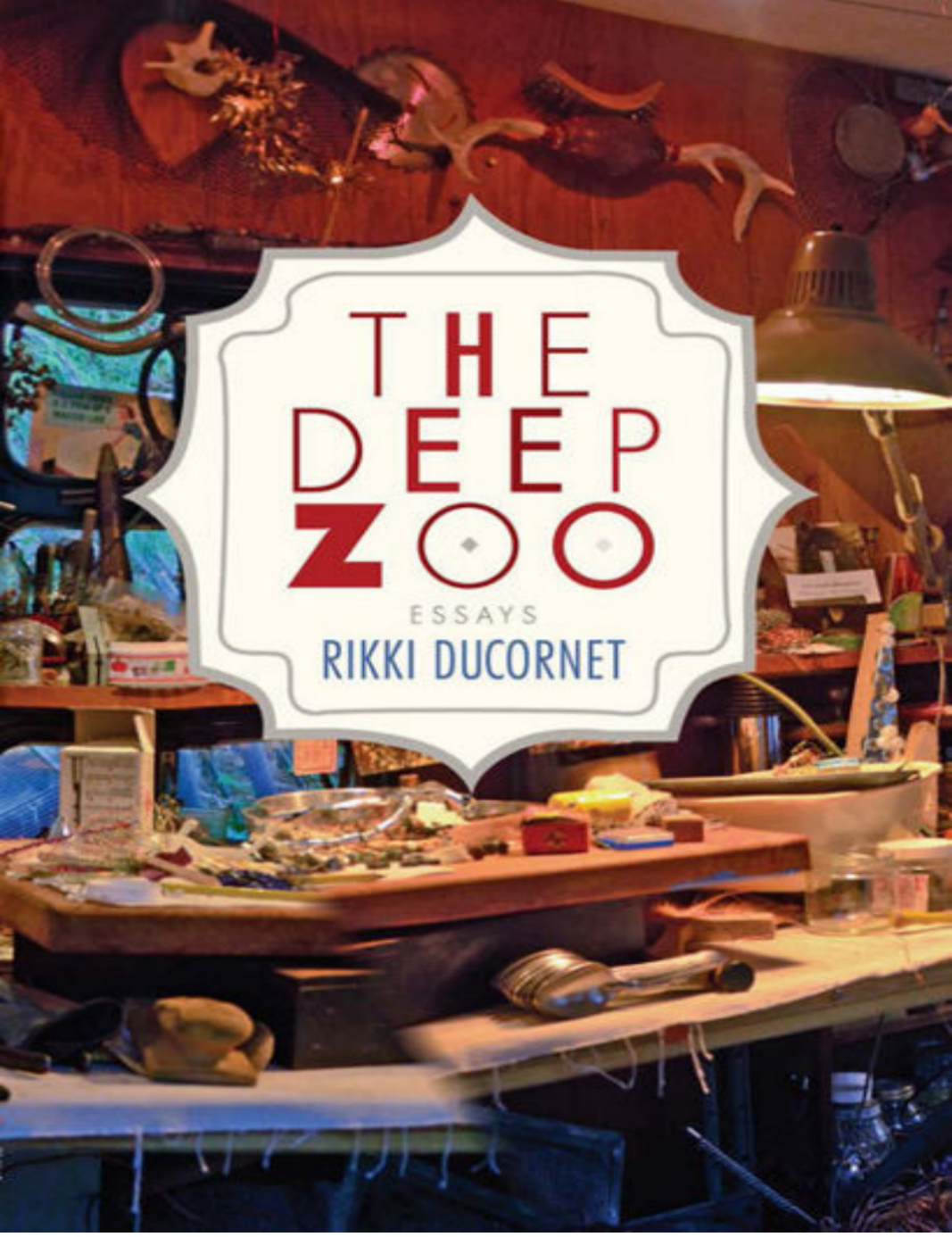
THE
DEEP
ZOO
ESSAYS
RIKKI DUCORNET

SHOUT
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IT

# Annotation

**Included in *Library Journal's* "25 Key Indie Fiction Titles, Fall 2014-Winter 2015".**

Within the writer's life, words and things acquire power. For Borges it is the tiger and the color red, for Cortázar a pair of amorous lions, and for an early Egyptian scribe the monarch butterfly that metamorphosed into the Key of Life. Ducornet names these powers *The Deep Zoo*. Her essays take us from the glorious bestiary of Aloys Zötl to Abu Ghraib, from the tree of life to Sade's Silling Castle, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to virtual reality. Says Ducornet, "To write with the irresistible ink of tigers and the uncaging of our own Deep Zoo, we need to be attentive and fearless — above all very curious — and all at the same time."


- Rikki Ducornet
  - The Deep Zoo
  - Books of Natural and Unnatural Nature
  - Her Bright Materials: The Art of Margie McDonald
  - Houses on Fire
  - Water and Dreams
  - War's Body
  - The Egyptian Portal: The Art of Linda Okazaki
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# Rikki Ducornet

# The Deep Zoo

*For my son, his spirited heart and music*

# *The Deep Zoo*

> *Writing is the uncovering of that which was unrevealed.*
>
> *— GHANI ALANI, Dreaming Paradise*

In the tradition of Islam, the first word that was revealed to Mohammed was *Igrá* (Read!). The world is a translation of the divine, and its manifestation. To write a text is to propose a reading of the world and to reveal its potencies. Writing *is* reading and reading a way back to the initial impulse. Both are acts of revelation.

◆

The Ottoman calligraphers delighted in creating mazes of embellishments in which the text was secreted like a treasure. The text needed to be deciphered and the task proved the worthiness of the reader. These calligraphers' mazes remind us that if the text is the mirror of an exorbitant, mutable universe, it is playful too. The maze places the text within an intimate space, very like a garden, where the text hides, then reveals itself; perhaps it could be said such a text is *irresistible.* Writes Gaston Bachelard: “All the spaces of intimacy are designated by an attraction” (*Poetics of Space*).

◆

The texts we write are not visible until they are written. Like a creature coaxed from out a deep wood, the text reveals itself little by little. The maze evokes a multiplicity of approaches, the many tricks we employ to tempt the text hither. The maze is both closed and open; it demands to be approached with a “thoughtful lightness” (Calvino). The powers lurking within it are like stars. Despite their age and inaccessibility, their light continues to reach us and to reveal us to ourselves.

◆

A playful mind is deeply responsive to the world and informed by powers instilled during infancy and childhood, powers that animate the imagination with primal energies. A playful mind is guided as much by attraction as consistency and coherence — and I am thinking here of Lewis Carroll’s Looking Glass world — its consistent tyrants, the coherence of its nonsense and the energy of Alice’s fearless lucidity. The Looking Glass reminds us that the world’s maze is attractive to eager thinkers. After all, playfulness describes as much the scientist as the artist (and Lewis Carroll was both).

The idea that the world was engendered by the spoken word

comes to us from Egypt. Here language flourished, mirroring and delighting in the phenomenal world. Here Paradise persisted; the gods and their creatures dwelling together in good understanding or, phrased differently, in *knowledge* of one another. And if the world of nature and its book indicated the divine, it also provided a place of unlimited encounters. To name a thing was to acknowledge and evoke its primary potencies — religious, medical, and magical. Plants, minerals, and animals were not only animated by the divine breath (nous), they were its vessels. Each tree, bird, river, and star was an altar, the dwelling place of a god. To gaze upon the world's image reflected in the waters of the Nile was to gaze into and reflect upon a sacred face or body: Hathor the cow-faced goddess embodied by the moon, Horus, the falcon, perched among the reeds.

Deep in the desert, each fossil shell was seen as Hathor's gift, tossed to earth from the sky; the fossil sea urchin's five-pointed star needled to its back indicated its stellar origins and explains why such things are found placed near the dead in ancient tombs. To use a lovely term of Gaston Bachelard's, such a reverie — and to leap from stone to star can only be called a reverie—"digs life deeper, enlarge(s) the depth of life." Bachelard offers these lines from the poet Vincent Huidobro:

In my childhood is born a childhood burning like alcohol.
I would sit down in the paths of night
I would listen to the discourse of the stars
And that of the tree.
— *The Poetics of Reverie*

Such *sympathies*—the stone, the moon caught in the branches of the willow, the gods, the stars — are born of looking at the world and a deep dreaming. The ancient world of sympathies, rooted in inquisitiveness and informed by imaginative seeing, gave us marvelous aesthetic and scientific achievements; alchemy for example — that exemplary amalgam of science and poetry, that "immense word reverie" says Bachelard. It would be a mistake to dismiss such *sympathies* as mere foolishness, for they were born of qualities of mind that illustrate what Italo Calvino calls the "lightness of thoughtfulness" (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*) and illumine his phrase: "Poetry is the enemy of chance." The moment one reaches for the star-struck stone, the reverie begins; the moment its star is recognized as a piece of the night sky fallen to earth, the poem begins. Chance gives way to a deep seeing and the recognition of a pattern that informs the mind with light, a pattern that incandesces and *burns like alcohol.* If poetry is the enemy of chance, it is also *the daughter of chance.*

If I have chosen to open this essay with an evocation of an

ancient world and its *sympathies,* it is because the urgencies concealed within the maze of the mind that animate our imaginations, provoke incandescence on the page. I am not calling for magical thinking, obscurity, or preciousness, but for an eager access to memory, reverie, and the unconscious — its powers, beauties, terrors, and, perhaps above all, its rule-breaking intuitions, and to celebrate with you the mind's longing to become lighter, free of the weight of received ideas and gravity-bound redundancies. If we were scientists and not writers, we would not waste our time reinventing gravity. Speaking of a poet he especially admires, Calvino says,

The miraculous thing about his poetry is that he simply takes the weight out of language to the point that it resembles moonlight.

— *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

And Bachelard:

For things as for souls, the mystery is inside. A reverie of intimacy — of an intimacy which is always human — opens up for the (one) who enters into the mysteries of matter.

— *The Poetics of Reverie*

The mysteries of matter are the potencies that, in the shapes of dreams, landscapes, exemplary instants, and so on, inform our imagining minds; they are powers. For Bachelard they take the form of shells, a bird's nest, an attic; for Borges a maze, mirrors, the tiger; for Calvino moonlight, the flame, and the crystal; for Cortázar ants on the march and the cry of the rooster.

Potencies are never static but in constant flux within our minds, and what's more, they *fall into sympathy* with one another. For example, for Borges, there is an evident sympathy between the tiger's stripes, the world's maze, language, and the maze of the mind; for Calvino, between moonlight and the lucent transparency of clear thinking; for Bachelard, between attics and a love of solitude; for Cortázar, between the cock's cry and the knowledge of mortality, of finitude.

◆

The world of animals is an ocean of sympathies from which we drink only drops whereas we could drain torrents from it.

— LAMARTINE

(as quoted by Giovanni Mariottini in his essay on Aloys Zötl, *FMR* #1)

One evening years ago, a family circus set up its shabby tent in the park of a French village — Le Puy Notre Dame — I called home. As I approached the park, I heard the sound of a powerful motor and searched the sky for an airplane — a rarity at that time in that place. The sky was empty of everything, even clouds, and the thrumming I heard was the purring of tigers. An instant later, I saw the cage and

two exquisite tigers, surely drugged; their contentment in such small quarters was uncanny. If I recall this distant evening, its circus and its tigers for you now, it is in the guise of an introduction to *potencies in the shape of beasts.*

For the first issue of Franco Maria Ricci's magazine *FMR*, Julio Cortázar was asked to write an essay on the bestiary of a little-known and eccentric nineteenth-century painter from the foothills of the Bohemian mountains whose name is Aloys Zötl. From 1832 to 1887— the year of his death — Zötl painted 170 achingly beautiful watercolors of animals inhabiting the ideal landscapes of his imagination. Years were kingdoms: 1832 ruled by fish, 1835 by reptiles, 1837 by the gentle tyranny of birds. André Breton called his bestiary "the most sumptuous ever seen."

Instead of describing Zötl's bestiary, Cortázar chooses to walk us through his own Deep Zoo. His essay is titled "A Stroll among the Cages" and it is a parallel journey on a path *burning like alcohol* that generously leads straight to Cortázar's own holding ground of totems, just as it prepares our eyes for the sight to come: Zötl's lucent tigeries and tigered lucencies:

And then a cock crowed, if there is a memory it is because of that, but there was no notion of what a cock was, no tranquilizing name, how was I to know that was a cock, that horrible rending of the silence into a thousand pieces, that shattering of space throwing its tinkling glass down on me, a first and frightful Roc.

This shattering of silence precipitates the infant Cortázar into a waking nightmare that would never abandon him entirely. It informs the beasts that follow — with a vaguely menacing shimmer.

"What comes next," writes Cortázar, "has a Guaraní Indian name: mamboretá, a name that's long and beautiful just like its green and prickly body, a dagger that suddenly plunges into the middle of your soup or drops onto your cheek when the summer table is set," and there is always an aunt who flees in terror, and a father who authoritatively proclaims the inoffensive nature of the mamboretá while thinking, perhaps, but not mentioning the fact that the female devours the male in the middle of copulation. And Cortázar recalls the terrible moment when the "mamboretá would become enraged" with him for past torments and look at him from its branch, accusingly. Barking frogs come next (Zötl, by the way, was especially partial to frogs, and the lion's part of his bestiary belongs to them), and swarming ants that "pass through a house like a detergent, like the fearsome machine of fascism," locusts whose devastation brings Attila to mind, and a couple of amorous lions, their bodies trembling "slightly with the orgasm." Cortázar fulfills his promise to us admirably: we have strolled among the animals, although to tell the

truth, there were no cages anywhere. The vision is clear, unobstructed, and hot. Cortázar has given us totemic potencies; he has given us Aloys Zötl.

Now, because I cannot offer you Zötl's paintings, and because Cortázar chose not to describe them, the task falls to me.

◆

The imaging consciousness holds its object (such images as it imagines) in an absolute immediacy.

— GASTON BACHELARD, *The Poetics of Reverie*

*Immediacy* is precisely the word that characterizes Aloys Zötl's bestiary. With few exceptions, he had seen his subjects in books only, yet painted them with feverish deliberation. I imagine it was chronic and unrequited longing that drove him on, for his bestiary surges with all the kaleidoscopic opulence of a mushroom-enhanced daydream. Spangled and lucent, Zötl's beasts have been conjured hair by hair; one can count their whiskers, their feathers, and their teeth. (One thinks of Borges's magician, dreaming hour after hour and one by one the infinite elements that make for a living man.) Zötl's creatures take their ease in gardens as lavish as wonder-rooms; he has packed his pictures with rarities, so that the overall effect recalls the haunting superabundance of Max Ernst's experiments with rough surfaces and sopping rags, those hieroglyphic landscapes haunted by hierophantic loplops. Or Borgesian dream gardens, which are the amalgam of all the gardens one has ever loved. Zötl's pictures provide a glimpse of paradise: it is a first glimpse, prodigal and unfettered. In other words, Zötl has painted the potencies of Old Time, when to name a thing was to bring it surging into the real. Even his scattered stones are poised for speech.

But — what about tigers? It seems there are none. However, there is a leopard, completed in April 1837. He is the same leopard that haunts the fables of the Maya and, as all the rest, he is meticulously painted *and he is very still.* Clearly he has heard a sound that has frightened him.

Perhaps he has heard, and for the first time, the crowing of a cock. And perhaps this is the writer's task: to make audible a sound of warning — which is also the sound of awakening.

◆

The subconscious is ceaselessly murmuring, and it is by listening to these murmurs that one hears the truth.

— GASTON BACHELARD, *The Poetics of Reverie*

Back to Egypt, where things and their names were not seen as separate entities, but were instead in profound sympathy with one another. These perceived sympathies are often very playful, as in this story of Isis and Seth.

Seth, in the form of a bull, attempts to overcome Isis. Fleeing, she takes the form of a little dog holding a knife in its tail and evades him. In his thwarted excitement, Seth ejaculates and his seed spills to the ground.

When Isis sees this she cries, “What an abomination! To have thus scattered your seed!”

Where Seth’s seed has fallen, a plant grows called the coloquint (or bitter apple). In ancient Egypt, the word for “coloquint” and “your seed” is one and the same.

Within a writer’s life, words, just as things, acquire powers. For Borges, *Red* is such a word, as are *Labyrinth* and *Tiger*. And if Beauty in the form of a yellow tiger or a red rose “waits in ambush for us” (*Seven Nights*), beautiful words are the mind’s animating flame.

In his essay on his blindness, Borges recalls a cage he saw as a child holding leopards and tigers; he recalls that he “lingered before the tiger’s gold and black.” Nearly blind, he is no longer able to see red, “that great colour which shines in poetry, and which has so many beautiful names,” but it is the yellow of the tiger that persists, as does its beauty and the power of its beautiful name. In his story “The Zahir,” the Tiger *is* the Zahir; it is the face of God, God’s name, the sound he uttered when he created the world, the “shadow of the Rose” and the “rending of the Veil” (*Labyrinths*). Tiger is the power that brings the unborn universe surging into the real and, what’s more, it is the name of the infinite book you and I are writing; it is the letters of each word of this book; Tiger is the calligrapher’s maze and also the text hidden within that maze.

It is the *shell* that tigers Bachelard — that lover of intimacy and solitude. A creature with a shell is a *mixed creature;* it reveals and conceals itself simultaneously. You will recall that in ancient times a fossil shell acquired the potencies of the moon. Stones of unusual shapes were empowered by Osiris also; they evoked the myth of his dismemberment and his own scattered limbs. In the myth, Isis gathers the pieces of her husband’s broken body and makes him whole; she revives him. For Bachelard, “The fossil is not merely a being that once lived but one that is still asleep in its form.” He is speaking of the “spaces of our intimacy, the centers of (our) fate”; he is speaking of our memories, those powers that, “securely fixed in space,” remain coiled within us, ready to spring and inform our lives with immediacy and our thoughts with urgency.

In his *Poetics of Space,* Bachelard writes:

We have the impression that by staying in the motionlessness of its shell, the creature is preparing temporal explosions, not to say whirlwinds of being.

And in *The Poetics of Reverie:*

The passionate being prepares his explosions and his exploits in. . solitude.

The shell, the yellow tiger, the crowing cock, the moon — these are the potencies in which time is compressed in the form of memories. To write is to engage a waking dream, to, in solitude, prepare a whirlwind. Says Bachelard:

Daydreams illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected. In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening.

For Bachelard, Time has but one reality: that of the instant. The instant is our solitude stripped bare, stripped down to its essential potencies — its Deep Zoo.

◆

The shapes of time are the prey we want to capture.

— GEORGE KUBLER, *The Shape of Time*

When I was a child, I came upon the dead body of a red fox in the woods; it was early summer, and the fox's belly was burning brightly with yellow bees. A species of animate calligraphy, the bees rose and fell in a swarm that revealed, then concealed, the corpse. Yellow and black they tigered it, and they glamorized it too — transforming what otherwise might have seemed horrible into a thing of rare beauty. It is no accident that my first novel opens with the death of a creature in a wood.

If I have, throughout this essay, dwelled on the potencies of what I've been calling the Deep Zoo; it is because it is the work of the writer to move beyond the simple definitions or descriptions of things — which is of limited interest after all — and to bring a dream to life through the alchemy of language; to move from the street — the place of received ideas — into the forest — the place of the unknown.

But the Deep Zoo's attraction is not sufficient. We must take care that our books do not resemble those seventeenth-century wonder-rooms or nineteenth-century parlors, with their meaningless jumbles of stuffed bears, kayaks, giant lobsters, and assorted stools. In other words, just as the museum of natural history has contributed to, perhaps *enabled,* our practical knowledge of the phenomenal world — and do not forget that the development of the museum coincides with the exclusion of Christian orthodoxy from the process of scientific inquiry — so must the books we write be free of those restraints that impede aesthetic invention; so must they be *enabled* by the rigors of intellectual coherence. Again, if we are to be quickened by the prime qualities of the Deep Zoo, we cannot allow our books to be determined by excess or arbitrariness. Ideas and language deserve our chronic, acute attention. After all, a book is above all a place to think, and the lightness of thoughtfulness our way of approaching the truth.

It is our capacity for moral understanding that enables us to interpret the world and to act thoughtfully and with autonomy. As psychoanalysis demonstrates, knowledge of ourselves and the world allows us to heal, to transcend the moral darkness that suffocates and blinds us. The process of writing a book is similar as it reveals to the writer what is hidden within her: writing is a reading of the self and of the world. *It is a process of knowledge.* That is why the lost roads and uncharted territories of the world's maze deserve our interest. If a book is a place to think, it is a pragmatic place, a place of experiment and discovery, a *battleground* (Calvino's word) where the orthodoxies — religious, political, neurotic — that interfere with clairvoyance are dismantled and replaced by a new order. In other words, to write in the light of childhood's burning alcohol, with the irresistible ink of tigers and the cautious uncaging of our own Deep Zoo, we need to be attentive and fearless — above all very curious — and all at the same time.

In Maria Dermoût's *Ten Thousand Things*, a living sea snail in a box guards memories in the shapes of small, disparate objects. When the snail dies, it is replaced — a spiritual manipulation that is also an act of magic. Resurgent, the memories continue to inform the world with a playful, essential, and erotic mystery. Writes Borges:

In my soul the afternoon grows wider and I reflect.

— *Dream Tigers*

# *Books of Natural and Unnatural Nature*

SEED — I

Once the world was seeded with sympathies, a Book of Nature informing everything from the dreams of the living to the wistful expectations of the dreamless dead. Like all great books, Nature's Book was cherished for its risks, its contrarieties, wonders, and mutabilities, and for the sanctuary it offered, just as it imposed a perilous journey. If the laws of change, set in motion "from the earliest of beginnings"[1] were embodied within each one of us, so were the seeds of myth. When Ovid opens his *Metamorphoses* with the words, "My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind,"[2] it could be Darwin speaking. And when the *Rig Veda* challenges, "I ask you about the uttermost ends of the earth; I ask you where is the navel of the earth; I ask you about the seed of the stallion; I ask you, where is the highest place of speech,"[3] it poses questions still waiting to be answered.

Ovid describes the birth of a universe that is both ordered and boundless:

Stars and divine forms occupy the heavens, the earth harbors wild beasts and the yielding air welcomes the birds. When man appears, he, and of (his) own accord, maintains good faith and does what is right [how times change. .]; without compulsion [without compulsion!] the earth produces things spontaneously.[4] [In Ovid's world, Monsanto, the unimaginable, was not yet imagined.]

What if. . what if just as the traces of our earlier forms persist, encoded in our genes, a golden age persists deep within the mind, the human mind that produces a multitude of things spontaneously? And, like the "waters desirous of truth, never at any time ceases?"[5]

Years ago, a gift of a magic mushroom revealed to me, metaphorically at least, the origins of everything. But before that could happen, I needed to confront an infinitesimally small blue baboon (whom I later recognized as the associate of Egypt's Thoth — the one who guards Death's Portal, and who authored certain chapters of the *Book of the Dead*). He was exacting, malicious, and *incontournable.* But because I stood my ground he vanished; no trace of his acute gravity, nor his malevolence, haunted my first and last visit to. . I have no idea where! After all, there was no *there* there. And yet I returned from virtuality to here — which is also a dubious place, its sands very quick, its Amazons shrinking, its gleaming fish and yielding air sorely compromised — with a marvelous vision of a universe *seeded* with an infinite capacity *to name things*—and so begin to understand them with the mind.

This is what I saw: every atom of air was comprised of a Hindu god balancing in each of many palms and fists, a seminal thing. An infinity of hands was poised to seed the universe with meaning. The Blue Baboon had yielded his finite holdings to boundlessness. Then, in an instant, all this dissolved and was replaced by letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Every atom of air was now a letter inked in black. They had been hanging there forever, waiting for a breath, an intention, a receptive mind to catch fire.

(Very recently, when I saw Karl Sims's marvelous hyperanimation *Panspermia,* it seemed familiar, an inevitable extension of the mushroom's conjuration of a universe seeded with possibility.)

If this happened many years ago, I wonder even now that an agnostic and a skeptic can, within her mind's eye, see a cosmos seeded with letters, and so: *voices.* But, then again, it stands to reason. Butterflies have voices. Enamored mice, bats, and whales sing to the beloved; bees write upon the air; recently I heard a deer buzz to her fawn, and having eavesdropped on them only yesterday (the local marine center has a hydrophone), I know that out at sea, the orcas are symphonic. And, by the way, they call to one another by name. Each orca has a distinctive name.

◆

Just as a good book is poised to leap into our lives and change us, in nature every seed is poised to quicken. (There are seeds, found in ancient tombs and planted, that have leapt to life after several thousands of years in limbo.) When you look at seeds up close, you appreciate that they are as various as glyphs, and that their forms evoke a multitude of familiar — and not so familiar — things. The seed of the cornflower, say, looks like a squid from another solar system. Instead of tentacles, it has feathers; its body is hairy, and it wears its teeth like feet. Purslane could be a high-fashion evening purse of quilted raspberry silk with a gilded clasp; the seed of the yellow floating heart — and it is dispersed in water — is very like a version of a distant ancestor, a one-celled animal, its many arms (or are they legs?) orbiting its body like the beams that emanate from the solar disc during an eclipse. In fact, these are bristles that catch to the feathers of waterbirds and so assure the seed's dispersal.

There are seeds that look like the noses of certain apes, the bottoms of apes, or parrot beaks, tortoise shells, machines of war, the crowns of pontiffs, caricatures of wags and luminaries drawn by Max Beerbohm.

◆

Imagine with me a book that, like a seed held in the reader's hands, under her gaze, *effloresces*. A book that contains not only other books, a library, the world's library — a pleasure already almost ours

— but a book that, like a living organism, evolves in unique and unexpected ways. A book whose every mutation persists in space and rides the air. That, like the chrysalis, explodes on the scene in new and dynamic forms with each reading. It is thought that whales sing their world into visibility and so: meaning, stereoptically. Let us acknowledge how their songs extend and enliven our own. Imagine with me a book that, like those gardens of Osiris and Adonis once so beloved of the Egyptians and the Greeks, is the place where Eros sleeps and dreams, and awakens again and again. A book that, as it surfaces, respires. .

NAKHT — II

Once, in Egypt, the word for scribe was *nakht.* It means: *Observer of the Hours of the Night.*[6]

The god of the interstices, Thoth, guards the truth and the portals of the palaces of deepest night. He is the god of the scribes; to appease him, one offers him a palette, brushes, and ink. Thoth heals the moon's wounded eye and calculates its course through the sky. He inscribes the pharaoh's name "on the fruits of the tree of history,"[7] a tree that, as does the tree of life, suffers as we pass these brief moments.

In an ancient rock tomb of Egypt's Middle Kingdom, there is a luminous painting of a marsh. Thickets of papyrus riot with birds, and everywhere nests brim with eggs. A fertile world in which geese and falcon, ibis, and butterfly fly together. Knowingly painted, the butterflies are African monarchs.

Within this tomb that can be read like a book, the wings of the butterflies propose a secondary text with which the birds are conversant. The text, clearly visible, informs the birds of the butterflies' toxicity. In the face of death, the butterflies flourish. What's more, the text is not contained within the painting, but unspools into the tomb. The pharaoh's gilded beard, so evident on the sarcophagus, his bound corpse within, are both made to evoke a monarch's chrysalis; the pharaoh's linens are studded with amulets in the form of butterflies.

Back to the painting. Here the space between the fertile marsh and the upper sky suggests a divine intersection, a fluid boundary between a wealth of life we can only imagine and the sacred impulse of generation. The sun itself is a fertile seed; it is an egg. Within the *Book of the Dead,* one reads: "If the Egg flourishes, then shall I flourish; if it lives, I shall live; if it breathes the air, I shall breathe the air; if it does not flourish, nor live, nor breathe the air, then I shall do none of these and die."[8]

Special attention has been given to the painting of the monarch's

organs of courtship. The male's pencil hairs, and the gland tucked within his hind wing where his pheromones are kept, is clearly visible. When a male monarch encounters a female, he will use his pencil hairs to reach for a fragrant powder of crystals, and dust her antennae. Enthralled, she will let him enter her body in a dust storm of fragrance. (The monarch butterfly's egg looks like a grain of rice stitched with threads of mica.)

The writing on the monarch's wings, the nests and eggs balancing among the reeds, the creatures soaring in the interstices of marsh and upper sky, the pharaoh's beard and shroud — all speak of the breath of life. Sewn among the linens, close to the pharaoh's body, is the ankh — that symbol of life, of living, of "the life that cannot die."[9]

All the gods carry the ankh in their right hands; it is the oldest of the amuletic signs. And it should come as no surprise that the ankh is nothing more than a slight variation of the butterfly glyph. Or that the children who perished in the Nazi death camps chalked the walls with butterflies. Or that the face of the pharaoh on the sarcophagus rises from the chrysalis-beard like a sun. The sun, which in the *Book of the Dead* is called both eternal and incomprehensible, and also: *joyous.* Creator of eternity, the sun is born of water.

A pharaoh's tomb is a symbol of the word — perhaps it was a vowel (in the sacred texts of Islam, it is said to be a small sequence of vowels) — that sets the world of things in motion. Steeped in gum, surrounded by jars of tripes and wine, the pharaoh is poised at the world's edge, waiting in expectation of dissolution and the acquisition of a new orientation and identity. In other words, the tomb is an ever-evolving text, a form of dynamic earth and skywriting, an act of magic *and* a place of knowledge. Everything within it conspires to unbind the spirit from its husk and assure its release. (In Arabic, the verb *to release* is synonymous with the verb *to write.*)[10]

*A* final reading: the fruit of the calotrope — the toxic plant the monarch's caterpillar feeds upon — is doubled; it looks like a pair of testicles. When the poet says to his lover, "Your balls are the fruit of the calotrope,"[11] he speaks to his desire, to the lover's life force; he speaks to death, the risk of love's death, the death of life — but also: he evokes regeneration. All these are among the mutable forms Eros takes. And, the lover embodies Eros. Like the god, he possesses "the fluid of life."[12] Imagine with me a book that, like the heartbeat of a lover, pulses to the rhythm of the reader's heart. The heart that, for the Egyptians, was the place where memory was safely kept, memory and the imagination.

EYE — III

In his *Origin of Species,* Darwin lists the qualities that give the

animal a selective advantage in the struggle for life: fecundity, vigor, agility — but rarely speaks of perception. . To see or be seen: Darwin neglects the mechanisms of animal vision and focuses instead on the strategies of visibility, camouflage. . mimetism.[13]

And what of the ways in which the human animal perceives (or does not perceive) the other animals? If our eye was long ago enchanted, one could say *glamorized* by the beasts, it is also an unknowing eye, famished and reductive. To lethal effect, it faults and punishes the world for its mutabilities, its sprawl of forms, the ephemerality of experience, the enigmatic nature of creatures each day more incomprehensible in their gathering solitude and fragmentation — as we rush to pave the planet over with graves and extinguish the stars.

Examples of our shortsightedness abound of course, but here is one among the many that struck me for its eccentricity. Throughout the islands of the Caribbean,

the cucuju [firefly] [was] worn by the ladies as a most fashionable ornament. As many as fifty or a hundred are sometimes worn on a single ballroom dress. . the insect [was] fastened to the dress by a pin that pierces its body, and is worn only while it is still alive, for it no longer emits light after it dies.[14]

An insect pinned to a bodice is emblematic of a terrible loss. Because it is the hidden significance of things that both explains and propels us forward with an eager intelligence. The paradox of hidden knowledge is that it recognizes — in ways that are wordless and intimate — an embrace as old as time, older than language. And yet it is also the force that leads to the impulse of word-making. I am thinking of the appearance of written language in the Nile Valley, the seed-glyphs that encased not only the name of a thing, but its sacred and medicinal value, as well as its affinities to the proximate world. And I am thinking of the wondrous, even more ancient cuneiform of the Mesopotamians, the origins of which were secular, born of economic and administrative necessity — but which also allowed for the naming and organizing of all things perceptible: trees and the things made of wood, reeds, thatch, and basketry; the human face, its expressions, moles, and hair — and all contained in a vast number of lists. So you see, we in the West were from the start blessed or cursed with a grocer's eye. An eye in evidence several thousand years later in one of the world's most beautiful Books of Nature, imagined and made real by an eighteenth-century pharmacist named Albertus Seba.

Seba lived in Amsterdam at a time when the city was a center for international maritime travel. He attended to the returning sailors' afflictions, often trading rare and exotic specimens for medicines. Over time he formed an extraordinary collection including snakes,

shells, centipedes, a fetal elephant, corals, butterflies, porcupines, and squid. He commissioned artists to produce a vast series of hand-tinted copperplate engravings, which were published from 1734 to 1765.

The study of natural history free from erroneous correspondences was in its beginnings, so that the stunning plates offer a jumble of forms as inscrutable as the alphabets of unknown languages. Tantalizing, they are like the rattle that, held before the infant's eye, exists in the mind only as long as it is visible; they imply so much yet withhold more, and once the page is turned, vanish. Seba's insects — katydids, grasshoppers, walking sticks, and crickets — are posed in rows as stiff as toys of tin. (And they all hold their upper front legs open wide as if to greet us with an embrace.) Already there is a paucity of bees.

And yet. If naming and listing leads to a certain disarticulation of the world, it also articulates the experience of the ineffable; it allows us to consider and articulate causes and effects and even to cherish the anomalous, because when known patterns are disrupted, we are forced to consider (and to reconsider) the meanings of things. Says Jean Bottéro: "Mesopotamians, in accordance with their vision of the world, always seem to have devoted a lot of attention to *mirabilia,* to *portenta*."[15]

Sometime in the first half of the second millennium, the Mesopotamians' seminal lists evolved into a majestic encyclopedia of nearly ten thousand entries.

◆

Our delight in taxonomy takes many forms. Recently I came upon a reference to a palace in China said to have been built by a prince named Wan-Ming. If I bring this up now, it is because Wan-Ming's palace was — or so it seems to me — Mesopotamian in character. And it causes me to consider the real possibility that, if Nature loves order, the beautiful, and the anomalous, Wan-Ming's impulse is not only Mesopotamian and profoundly human, but akin to the bowerbird's delight in building his bower, the bower that, like a palace, is also a place of ordered delight.

The palace was filled with numberless and identical rooms, joined by identical passageways. One found one's way by smelling distinctly fragrant things that filled large basins set out in each room. The first sort were made of aromatic gums such as camphor, frankincense, myrrh, and euphorbium. The second offered the scents of plants: roots, blossoms, and leaves; the bark of certain trees and perfumed oils: santal, cedar, patchouli, aloeswood, clove, pine, attar of rose. There were also plants brought from the sea. The third sort were the penetrating scents of animals: musk, civet, and ambergris — which, fabricated by the bodies of whales, can be found (according to the

ancients) after the passage of thunderstorms. The children who lived in Wan-Ming's palace never tired of inventing and navigating new itineraries blindfolded.

◆

Imagine with me, if you will, a book of fragrances to be read with eyes closed on moonless nights, a book that in the silence of the darkest hours dispels the reader's stubborn certitudes, banishes lies, and offers in exchange an experience of the world's hidden coherence, the vitalities of first and last things, the strings that make up everything, those active principles in which the reader's own dream plays its part.

SPECULATIVE METAPHYSICS — IV

Like Wan-Ming's palace, the current and unfolding manifestations of speculative metaphysics — hyperanimation and virtual reality — offer luminous and palpable pages in a Book of Nature unlike any seen before, such as the virtual chimeras of Karl Sims, whose wondrous *Galápagos* offers stunningly imagined organic forms that evoke and subvert known physical bodies. In Sims's version of Eden, offered to the public on twelve concurrent computer screens, it is not the fittest that survive but the most beautiful.

"Perhaps," Sims says, "someday the value of simulated examples of evolution. . will be comparable to the value that Darwin found in the mystical creatures of the Galápagos Islands."[16] An idea extended further by John McCormack, whose work also provides insight into the nature of mutability, a world restlessly sparked by organic process, Eros in all its manifestations. McCormack's chimeras are "created through simple algorithmic rules. These rules might be thought of as the artificial life equivalent of DNA."[17] He continues — and what he says is extraordinary—"A central tenet of artificial life theory holds that we are one individual instance of life—'life as we know it'—and that there are more general mechanisms that define life—'life as it could be.'"[18] Says Robert Russett, the visionary scholar of virtuality: "As science and digital processes converge. . new systems — like human biological systems — would potentially. . adapt, learn and evolve, re-directing the(ir) design. . toward the organic."[19]

◆

Imagine with me an Absolute Book of Unnatural Nature, fully immersive, polysensory, eloquent, in which everything is reactive, self-replicating; a mutable, complex, and functioning system with which the reader — who is now far more than reader — may interact as she does with the real. Will such an artifice allow us to be more fully alive? More fully human? Will we be less fearful of the palpable dissimulations of our own imaginations than we are of the real itself?

When we dissolve into and interact with fully embodied avatars, will we cease to fear our own bodies and bodies other than our own? When the things of the world are all of our own invention, will we finally allow ourselves to cherish them? Will our worlds be sparked with the Breath of Eros, or will Eros vanish? When our tigers are striped to fit our fancy, and the ruined ocean is replaced by an apparition in which phantom orcas call out to one another in Klingon — will the world finally take on real significance?

In the ancient Buddhist caves of Ajanta in India, men, women, children, and animals are painted gazing at one another in adoration. And I cannot help but wonder: as we navigate the realms of our own manufacture, will we remember how to cherish one another, or will these realms turn out to be far too self-referential, a kind of beautifully furnished tomb, a mind loop, a mirror reflecting a mirror — offering a vista that can only induce dizziness, longing, and loneliness?

And if our virtual Edens do provide a wealth of profound experience, what of those other virtualities we still need to contend with? The Books of Rage, of Tyranny and War, those persistent Books of Endings?

BREATH — V

There is a small mollusk the size of a baby's fingernail. Over time, its foot has transformed to wings with which it navigates the oceans. A pteropod, it is fondly called a sea butterfly. Essential to the food chain, it feeds the fish that penguins and polar bears depend upon.

The sea butterfly is protected by its shell. But because of the precipitous acidification of the oceans, this shell is compromised. Within forty years, the sea butterfly will have vanished.

A perfect thing, always identical to itself, primordial, and, until now, imperishable, I think the sea butterfly is like the sacred vowels of Islamic mysticism alluded to at the beginning of this essay: the *i,* the *a,* and the *u*—said to spell the world. Their essential virtues are encapsulated by a consonant that protects the vowel from the eyes of the profane just as it signals its presence to the initiated. In this way the *i* becomes Mîm, the *a: Wâw*, and the *u: Nûn*. These extensions secure the vowels' power.

Unlike any other science, Islam's Science of Letters is a metascience, said to precede words and ideas, even the names of things. It is the science of the sacred breath made manifest, the breath that animates a world and assures its survival.

Imagine a Book of Nature that acknowledges, assures, and embraces the entire ecology of the planet as it respires. A world-book that, like the songlines of the whales and the Australian Aborigines,

both reveals and precipitates meanings in the singing. A Book of Nature that — as do the songs of the Efe Pygmies of the Ituri Rainforest — fuses the voices of insects, animals, and birds, even the sounds of thunder, lightning, and rain — making for an acoustic ecology. Imagine the book — as Borges describes it — that you and I are writing, embracing a world in which everything is given voice — the creatures and the plants, the waters within their cells, the alphabets coiled tightly within those waters, ready to unspool and quicken — a book in which everything is sparking, everything breathes.

Because our appreciation of plenitude, of the extraordinary, the unanticipated, the unknown, the ineffable — is essential to our natures. It is embodied. It makes us wise. Because Eros is sparked by Sympathies — not just between ideas, objective hazards, and leaps of mind, but encounters with mystery — the mystery of otherness and also — and evolution assures this — of likenesses. I am thinking of those instances over which we have no control, that surpass our wildest imaginings: here aesthetic intuition lies in ambush — fertile and dynamic, invigorated by delight.

Like the sea, the moment — and it is forever — is upon us; the moment spills open. And we are here to receive it and bear witness.

steel wood boat
plug bronze fire hose
nozzle aluminum
drain fitting truck
horn copper
nectarine pits sea
urchin spines
& capacitators

There is a persistent (if hazy) idea that art must be serviceable — provide moorage for a mummy, accommodate the Holy Water, match the sofa, teach us something uplifting, serve to move merchandise. Art, like play (and art is a form of play) smacks of frivolity and not so long ago was faulted for depending on *materials;* in this way, painting and sculpture were debased — unlike music, which lives in the ether as the angels do. (Although in certain quarters, music gets a bad rap too, for stimulating the senses.) Thankfully, art pays no attention and continues to subvert pieties and expectations, to rile fuddy-duddies and ride a brighter air.

plastic lathe turnings
street sweeper brush
boxcar locks
stainless steel wire
& capacitators

In the early fall of 2013, Margie McDonald was invited to install a wonder-room within the pristine and light-flooded upper gallery of the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art. Featured at the museum's opening, the installation was titled *Sea'scape* and provided not only a sea escape, but an adventure in seeing. In Margie's words,

Last winter, with a hard hat on my head, exposed to the elements, I spent time alone in the bare bones of the future gallery — still under construction. I had visions of suspended sea creatures the moment I saw the raw space and the soon-to-be Beacon windows. . I am fascinated by unusual organic life forms. Often I pick up a dictionary of northwest marine life for artistic vocabulary — visual cues and possible titles for my work. I flip through thorny plants, wet and spiny creatures, and strange insects; they are all of great interest to me. . I have been working as a full-time artist since 2006. Recycling is the basis of my work — I started with wire from the recycle bin of the rigging shop and soon realized there was a wealth of material

available in those bins, scattered throughout the boatyard.

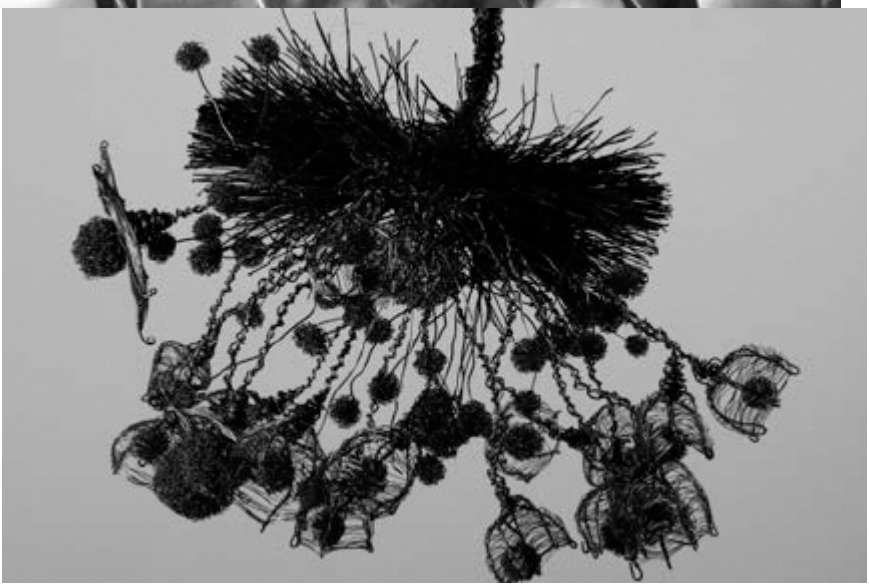
copper, aluminum
license plate corners
porcelain insulators
capacitators

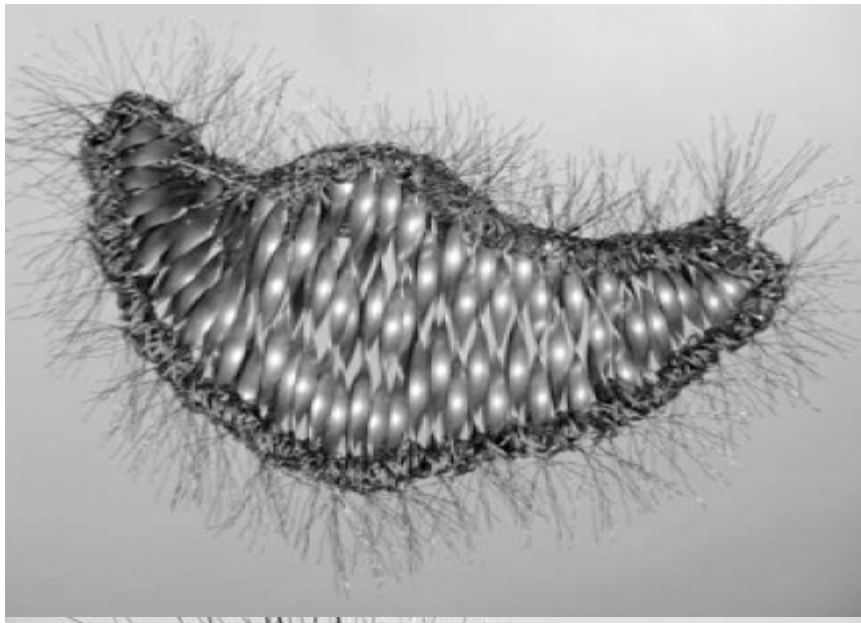
Approaching the installation, one could not help but be spellbound, and many laughed out loud. Margie had made a space for dreaming on one's feet. All kinds of things were going on, and one entered into a jovial, whimsical (and whimsically erotic) swarm of forms that evoked enchantment. Her deviant ocean zoo — bristling with fishhooks and alphabet beads, insulators and aluminum leg bands for chickens — had triumphantly colonized the gallery, and the result was downright symphonic. John Cage would have loved this adventure in seeing, as would have Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. (If limericks could be embodied by wire and suspended from the ceiling, they would look something like this.)

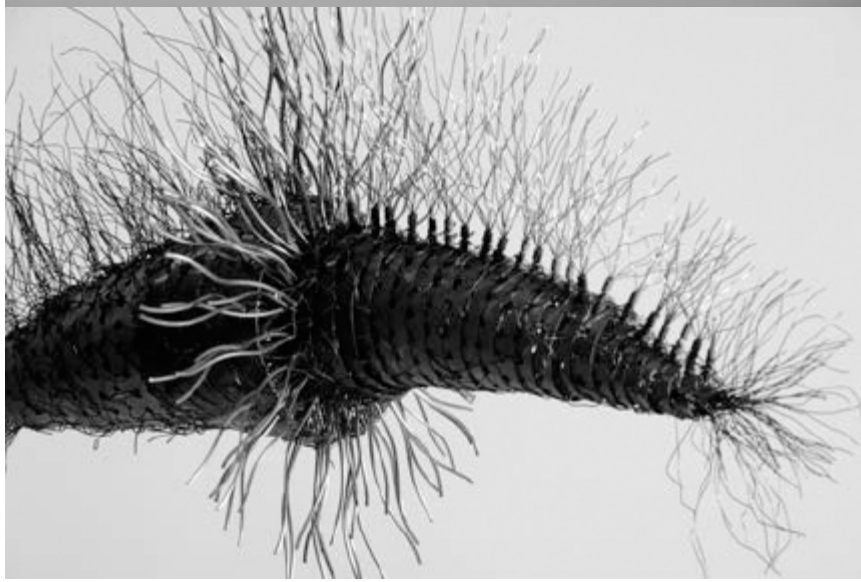
Things with material bodies are restless: they are playful, they attract one another, and they evolve. The marvelous resides in things because they do not stand still. And I recalled the early animations of Karl Sims, in which computer-generated creatures made of geometric solids and programmed to learn from their mistakes, are presented with obstacles they knock down, climb over, or push aside. Both artists remind us the imagination is all about subverting limits.

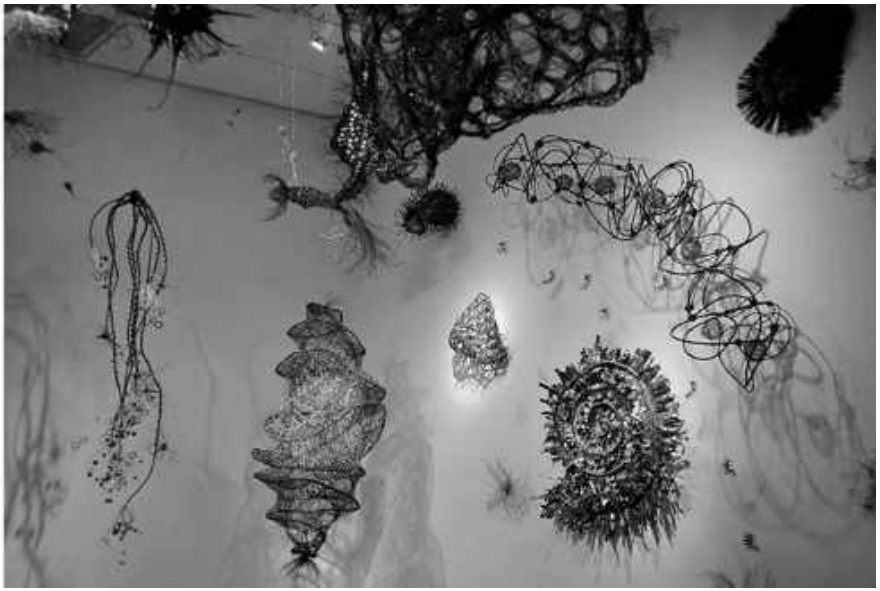
"Play," Margie says, "is all that I do." We are in her studio — a sanctuary in sumptuous and harmonious disorder devoted to the noble games she plays with such spunk and hilarity. "When I've got my materials, I just want to see what that one little thing is gonna jump off to."

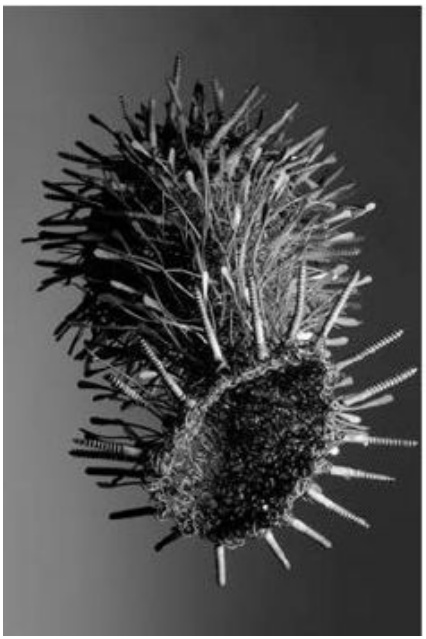
Looking up into a snarl of red wire, I know we all burn more brightly beneath her stars.

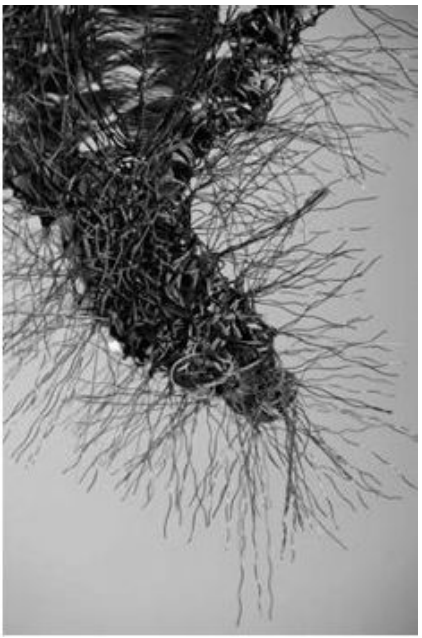












# *Houses on Fire*

Our food is perverse.[1]

Werner Herzog's great film, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser,*[2] offers a stunning glimpse of all Kaspar lost when, at the age of four, he was isolated in a dungeon. For twelve years he lived like an eel in the twilight. Kaspar was very likely the heir to the throne of Baden, and Herzog provides him with a flickering memory of an exotic and beautiful landscape painted on glass and projected on the wall by the flame of a magic lantern. These ardent images evoke the wealth of beauties lost, the extremity of that loss, and the untenable despair any memory of loss exacted. As when in 1828 Kaspar visited the Veste castle in Nuremberg — so like his childhood home — and fell senseless to the ground. "The dead move among us in our memory," writes Joy Williams, "and that is the resurrection."[3] But in those savagely eroded years, nothing moved, neither the dead nor the living. Kaspar remembered nothing. He could not dream. Spelled as in a fairy tale, he was suspended in time. Paradoxically, it was this suspension that kept him alive.

"The unconscious spreads its great dark web," writes Kathryn Davis, "where the villainous agents of our fate lurk side by side with the magical agents of reversal."[4] Reversal would come, if briefly. After his release, Kaspar eagerly searched out his memories and began to dream. He longed to be fully alive and aware. He was perplexed and fascinated by the limbo that had for so many years claimed him. When a first attempt was made on his life and he lay in fever and delirium, he cried out to his vanished and unknown aggressor, "You have killed me, before I understand what life is."[5] Yet when one looks at Kaspar's luminous paintings, it is evident he *had* returned to the world and burned in Beauty's embrace. Whereas, to evoke beauty in captivity was an impossibility, a lethal risk.

◆

Beauty's power to rend the heart and sear the mind is the subject of Clarice Lispector's *The Imitation of the Rose,* in which the repressed, mousy Laura, who has only just returned from "the perfection of the planet Mars,"[6] is made to sip milk for safety's sake, on the hour. Yet she must also *relax!* "Take things easy. . It doesn't matter if I get fat,"[7] Laura thinks, "beauty has never been the most important thing."[8] And yet nothing matters more to this woman who was raised in a convent and wears dresses the color of dung. A bouquet of roses undoes her; the roses release her from servitude only to send her careening back to Mars (Lispector's word for psychosis). "Like someone depraved, she watched with vague longing the tempting perfection of the roses. .

with her mouth a little dry, she watched them. Vacantly, sorrowfully, she watched them. . parched by envy and desire."[9]

The repressed imagination and the renunciation of the beautiful surface again in Lispector's novel *Near to the Wild Heart.* Steeped in isolation, the child Joanna wonders, "What's going to happen now, now, now?[10]. . For the silenced dragged out zzzzzz[11]. . and there was a great still moment with nothing inside it."[12] When in despair, her face burning, she asks her father, "What shall I do?" he thunders, "Go bang your head against the wall."[13]

Later, when Joanna has become a woman, her loneliness persists; in solitude she continues "slowly living the thread of her childhood and eyes sparkling, she burns like the air that comes from a stove whose lid is lifted."[14]

Such fevers also spire in the fantastic stories of Jean Ray. In one, a visit to a cannibal house causes the narrator to recall "the bitch who was his mother" serving him a meager supper and crying, "Eat! Who knows who will eat you!"[15] The infernal house will go up in flames; writes Kathryn Davis, "Sooner or later, the house will get the best of you. . Every house in the world, no matter how well built, will eventually catch fire."[16] If Beauty is dangerous, its danger quickens in the house from which it has been banished.

◆

In the Egyptian *Book of the Dead,* the soul must traverse a lake of fire in order to reach the afterlife. It has long intrigued me that the dead — whose chambers were stacked with serviceable things — carried no luggage. Their furniture, cosmetics, roast ducklings, and flasks of wine would be spirited across that lake and show up on the other side as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The dubious idea of finding a hot meal waiting reoccurred to me while reading Kathryn Davis's splendid novel *Hell.* "If you wrap your dead you can trick yourself into thinking they're actually headed somewhere like packages."[17]

In this tirelessly brilliant enchantment, something of a fairy tale (think: *Memoirs of a Midget*), Bildungsroman, roman à clef, murder mystery (all this!), a family home and a dollhouse within it ceaselessly shift places and most often cannot be told apart. (Unless, for example, a baby's head falls off and topples to the floor.) In fact "all the houses are haunted. Just because the house is a little house inside a big house it doesn't mean it escapes God's notice."[18] Recall that Yahweh chose to make Adam of mud; he hates his children and would gladly banish them from Paradise. Here *all* the gods haunt these rooms, and some mythic people too: "Beware when you open the front door, Pandora (is always) getting ready to open her famous box."[19] Like any place of

sacrifice, the grill is on, “the gods prefer their food red,”[20] and “the smell of scorched meat drifts up the stairs.[21]. . The gods go for the liver,”[22] and should you bend your ear to the “kitchen’s ceaselessly muttering exhaust fan you will hear Mrrrt, mrrrt, murder.”[23] Even lying in the safety of one’s bed, one cannot help but “hear the clamor” and feel “the heat of the stars.”[24] Considering God’s malevolence, is it surprising we belong to a “family given to the idea of apocalypse, some of us because we know we deserve to die, others because it suggests a convenient way out?”[25] Face it! “There is no escaping the house where you were born.”[26] Time is never on our side: “The clock strikes, the shadows lengthen and from the dining room comes the sound of stamping, followed by a vague shuffling noise, lax yet oddly precise, as if an approaching mummy’s trying hard not to trip over its unraveling feet.”[27]

Potential corpses, a family in *Hell* sits together eating “Devil on horseback.”[28] Eating and its outcome are the incontournable evidence of mortality. In the words of Nöelle Châtelet, “The kitchen is the belly of the house.[29]. . The exquisite afternoon teacakes, served on a porcelain dish along with Chinese tea, are already well on their way to becoming excrement.”[30]

Which sends me running for Jean Ray’s novella *Malpertuis,* where another family at table (“marrow soufflé, leg of lamb perfumed with garlic, roast fowl streaming with juice”[31]) shudders when the clock strikes three (and what does time do if not devour everything?), releasing the lead figurines that decorate the pudding dish. A tiny man, his face no larger than a thimble and so ugly as to scorch the eyes, his arms raised in rage, dashes across the table and is smashed beneath the fist of the resident taxidermist. Lastly, let us not forget Ferrei’s Rabelaisian (and Sadean) *La Grande Bouffe,* in which a feast is taken to horrific extremities by four existentially exhausted friends. Says one of them, “The smell of shit will never leave us.”[32]

◆

Walter de la Mare’s *Memoirs of a Midget* offers yet another feast fraught with shadows. When the tiny heroine, Miss M, sits down to the birthday dinner given in her honor, she finds a macabre array of dishes that insult her size and sensibilities. The clou du repas, a Suprême de Langues de Rossignols, says everything about the many ways in which she has been nailed down, detongued, and silenced.[33] Sent over the edge by a sip of absinthe, she steps onto the table to cry out to the one she loves, “Ah, Fanny. Holy Dying, Holy Dying! Sauve qui peut!”[34] This outburst shocks both her beloved and her hostess, and sends the “fairy,” “pocket Venus,” “knickknack” into exile.

The betrayal of destiny, so present in the fairy tale, resurges in these works, which all reveal the risks of appearing to be rather than

being, of containment over release. Just as the little heroines of Davis's *Hell* are submerged in bric-a-brac and besotted with gravy, Miss M threatens to drown in torrents of pygmy Venetian glass. . pygmy porcelain, absurd little mechanical knickknacks — piping birds, a maddening little operatic clock.[35] "I am sure, Midgetina," writes Fanny, "in some previous life you must have lived in the tiny rooms in the Palace at Mantua,"[36] (a reference to the Duke of Gonzague's small population of domestic "wonders"). Poor Miss M! "Sunk" all too often "as if in a bog, [in] ignorance of where or who [she] truly was."[37]

Fairy tale and gnostical themes alike abound in all these works: God is sick, the world a filthy inn, and the body the cage of the soul. It is no accident that the pudding served up in *Hell* proves tainted: "And before my very eyes the smooth white shape from which I've gone to such pain to remove all impurities has proved ultimately contaminated."[38] No accident when in Joy Williams's greatest novel *The Changeling* Pearl says to Walker, "The body is a corpse, just a corpse, and it's only the soul that keeps it from putrefication."[39] Pearl, whose story it is, sees herself as hopelessly flawed. If the flesh is corrupt, then she, by making a baby, "has punished them all."[40] (In gnostical terms, the soul is the body's capture.)

Already lost at the novel's beginning, Pearl explains, "I feel my soul is gone now. . I feel that all those children have it in some way."[41] Just as God has chosen to make his children of mud, incomplete and angry, Pearl's brother-in-law, Thomas, models the children he has acquired in his own flawed image. The children, each one abandoned somehow, have been swept up and emptied by Thomas, who, in the guise of saving them, feeds upon them. And the children, morbidly fascinated by werewolves, feed upon the helpless Pearl. Pearl suspects "God didn't love human beings much. . what he loved most was nothingness."[42] Later, feeling wretched, she thinks, "Perhaps the human race has yet to be born."[43]

◆

"I will be true to you, whatever comes," says the mother of three sons in the opening scene of Terence Malick's deeply imagined film *Tree of Life*.[44] She is speaking to the god of love and she is speaking to her sons, those sons who in their infancies "shouted for joy."[45] She is speaking to Nature, which matters to her greatly, and to Grace — which she embodies. But she cannot fulfill her promise. She will prove powerless in the face of her husband's incomprehension and jealous rage, a man who, like Jehovah, would betray his sons.

At the film's opening, we learn of the suicide of the youngest — the one who was musical and in this way closest to his father; the one

who also most resembles him. Malick then takes us on an extraordinary journey to the beginning of time, from the first spark to majestic images of the yeasting universe, the beginning of life, and, with real fearlessness (for the scene leaves the film vulnerable to ridicule and incomprehension), to the first gesture of compassion and awareness of loss and loneliness on the part of a living creature, and one of our most distant ancestors. From there we are brought back to the human family and the birth of a child. The trajectory is thrilling and serves to remind us just how extraordinary the human species is and how important the promise of its children. This child is the film's central character, Jack — the one who will bear witness and the one who finds the words to express the progress of his own alienation.

If in their early years the three sons thrive in the warm glow of an Edenic infancy, shadows gather; the dining room becomes a Star Chamber where the mother shrinks to near invisibility as the father swells to ominous proportions. He becomes an ogre, a giant, a demon unleashed, an eater of souls. Round as marbles, the food on the plate eludes the fork, the teeth. The "bread of life" is nowhere near this table. Disorder takes over. First the boys are silenced; then they are banished. Having tasted of the world's bounty and glimpsed their own capacities, they grow fearful, angry, and withdrawn. When Jack says to his mother, "What do you know?" he might as well be saying, "What do you know of love?"

Fascinated by a beautiful neighbor, Jack enters her house and sees a magnificent dinner table set out with crystal goblets and fine china. Everything is in place, yet the room is as still as a tomb. Having stolen a slip from a dresser drawer, he is overcome with shame and grief and wonders, "How do I get back?"[46] Words that recall Kaspar Hauser's own terrible acknowledgment of alienation and solitude: "Mother, I am so far away from everybody. ."[47]

Kaspar's life was a "Holy Dying"; like Miss M and Kafka's K, he is punished for being born. In Herzog's film, Kaspar is dreamed, a dream of people of all ages struggling up a mountain littered with rubble and rock. It is a vision of fallen angels, scattered and stumbling forward in isolation. Kaspar explains that what they will find at the top of the mountain is only death. His dream is the ecstatic revelation from one whose life was broken by those who believed the mountain lead to glory, and so immortality. Kaspar lived out a compounded tragedy; his tragedy is the mirror of our species' failure. For like all human children, he entered the world as a vehicle of light, a flame too hot, it seems, to handle. Kaspar's dream is the premonition of his end, and his end foretells the end of us all. Of his dream he says, "It seems to me my coming into the world was a terribly hard fall."[48] Writes Kathryn Davis, "Something is wrong with the house, the window you

washed only yesterday. . reflects the treacherous face of the world."[49]

# *Water and Dreams*

My first four novels are ruled by the elements: Earth, Fire, Water, and Air. These books are informed by, and much indebted to, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard — his "gentle manias" and irresistible investigations into the nature of the imagining mind.

Water's book, *The Fountains of Neptune,* tells the story of a boy who, seduced by the vision of his drowned mother's face, tumbles into the sea. Retrieved, he is suspended in a coma that lasts for fifty years. Like a fossil Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space,* the boy is "asleep in (his) form," the deep waters of his precarious mind kept murmuring by his doctor in her clinic, "where water is tamed in basins, bathtubs, and wells, and where even the ironwork of the garden fences, the kiosks and the gate, look like an abstraction of a water oily with eels."

Guided by Bachelard's *Water and Dreams,* I decided that my novel's variable music would evoke water of all kinds: swift, still, and shallow; stagnant, transparent, and frozen over; sweet, tainted, opaque. For example, when a sailor sings:

I've been to Bur Sa'id,
Shibizpur and Hooghly,
Crooked Island, Easter Island;
I've been to Corpus Christi.

I wished to evoke the bubbly turbulence in the wake of a boat pulled along by a good wind.

And the novel is punctuated by the water's *meteoric* forms (and this is a term taken from the period I evoke in the book's early stages): sleet, snow, hail, rain, and drizzle — all *powers,* here consciously associated in order to suggest the many moods of the sea. What follows intends to evoke both a needling rain and the heave of heavy weather: "Saturday and pissing vinegar. The old port has vanished in the rain; port and sky and sea all smeared together like a jam of oysters, pearl-grey and viscous."

I made lists that I no longer have, but looking into the novel's opening pages I find: sea, firewater, whisky, rum; ocean, sea-talkers, sailors, mermen; moonshine, shellback, dancing ships; fish, mists, listing ships; foam, sea wolf, jellyfish; flood-lands, liquid amber, tears; starboard, sea worm, milky haze; hail, surf, tidewater, rain; sops, floating island, sponge, splashing, drifting. .

And I imagined a book *bathed* in light, light a sensuous medium that, like water, seeps into every crack. Chapters three and four take place in an underwater haze.

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The idea that the music of the text would evoke waters of various kinds, was the only imposition I engaged; beyond that, as with all my books, the novel was expected to reveal itself. The characters dropped in and decided the direction the book — their book — would take. As did the unexpected collisions of words. The novel's intention evolved from within; the entire process had a weather of its own.

Bachelard says, "And the words wander away looking in the nooks and crannies of vocabulary for new company, bad company." Such bad company is scary and exhilarating, above all subversive — as it forces the writer to question her presumptions and keeps her on her toes.

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I think of a novel as an unfolding landscape, an entire country waiting to be deciphered. I have always leaned into new places, tugged along by curiosity and an expanding waking dream. How I travel is how I write my books. It is enough to have a dream for a guide, an intuition, an element. "How can one not dream while writing?" Bachelard asks. "It is the pen that dreams."

Finally, writing is a species of practical magic. Like sugar in water, the words one employs must dissolve and altogether vanish.

# *War's Body*

9/11 was an act of folly, but madness — and the ancients knew this — serves to disclose what has been hidden and needs to be revealed. It was not an act of isolated folly; Bin Laden is said to have hated the United States from the moment when, as a boy, he learned of Hiroshima. Yet in his address to Congress, George W. Bush stated, "They hate our freedoms"—a phrase that sought to explain everything and was readily embraced by the government, the public, and the press. I propose that 9/11's failure to initiate a national inquiry and debate about our foreign — and for that matter domestic — policy is rooted not only in our profound sense of entitlement and, until then, a belief in a God-given invincibility, but racism and sexual anger. Born of genocide and slavery, our democracy staggers beneath a failure to acknowledge and address its own defining brutal impulse. In fact, we had long betrayed freedom's marvelous promise, and have, perhaps irretrievably, contaminated that promise. In other words, we were not betrayed by Bush, but already complicit in his lies. The questions that needed to be asked were voiced by only a few, who were tagged as neurotic and unpatriotic, and ignored.

In the same speech, Bush assured the American people that "this will not be an age of terror." Yet our government's response was to set a city on fire, and within weeks, survivors of "shock and awe," children among them, were rounded up in the streets and taken to Abu Ghraib — a mirror of our own prisons in which sexual abuse is rampant. Currently, our prison population exceeds two million; 60 percent of those prisoners are racial and ethnic minorities. I would suggest that ours is a democracy undone by a chronic fear and loathing of the body, our own bodies and the bodies of strangers; perhaps it could be said that the body in our land is always a stranger, a sentiment evident in our irrational terror of health care, our willingness to allow the food industry to poison us, our fear of a woman's right to choose, gay rights, and so on — tendencies now acutely heightened with the success of the sanctimonious Tea Party and the far right's inability to accept the legitimacy of a black president.

Eros was brought down in Baghdad — Eros in its many forms: the gardens, the museums, a library reduced to ashes. Among so much lost to us forever were tablets many thousands of years old, unexamined, belonging to that most ancient of stories: *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* a story in which our own cultural heritage, including the Bible, is rooted. I suggest a pattern here: hating and fearing the body, we turn away from knowledge of the other. If we destroy the evidence of our

culture's roots in Mesopotamia, then we stand alone, unique, born fully formed of a god, chosen and invincible. Or maybe not. The destruction of Baghdad's library was the cultural equivalent of destroying the fossil evidence of evolution.

Currently, ours is a nightmarish land, both fearful of all it does not know and proud of this ignorance. Too many of us believe in miracles but not in evolution or global warming, the Second Coming but not social justice. We need to understand why.

# *The Egyptian Portal: The Art of Linda Okazaki*

*Every particle of love any sprig of an herb*
*speaks of water.*
*Follow the tributaries.*
*Everything we say has water in it.*

*— RUMI*

In her magnificent *Metamorphosis and Identity,* Caroline Bynum examines the word *mixto,* "A key term for ontological psychological and spiritual combination. . A mixtura," she continues, "is a monster (monstrum), a boundary category violation. . and can be marvelous or miraculous. . Mixturas are objects of stupor or admiration, unusual occurrences at which we feel terror or wonder."[1]

It has long seemed to me that the betrayed child who has had the strength to overcome trauma (a favorite theme of the fairy tale) may become something of a mixto; a violator of boundaries, an artist and a visionary. Trauma leads to a certain distancing from the world and, paradoxically, a novel and even essential revisioning of the world — and so reveals a portal of a kind. If Kaspar Hauser, for example, was

seen as a stupefying and admirable object himself — given his extraordinary ability to reclaim an identity after a twelve-year entombment in a stone dungeon — he managed, along with so much else in his short, ill-fated life, to produce visionary paintings in which the world of simple things is imbued with radiance. In one, an archetypal sprig muscles upward. It is the image of a sprig of iron that barred Kaspar's small window. If the window offered a glimpse of a stone wall, sun and moonlight surely mattered immensely, as well as the passage of an occasional butterfly or bird — although such sightings may have caused him too much pain to be sustained. For company Kaspar had three wooden toys — two horses, a dog, and red ribbons with which to adorn them. A pitcher of water — and there was never enough water — and a loaf of brown bread appeared when he slept — and he slept a great deal — as if magically. Kaspar was imprisoned at the age of four and chained to the floor. He was released twelve years later.

The betrayal of infancy is ubiquitous, and its forms are many. The survivors, the resilient ones, the ones who have known love, may manage to resurge with something of an integrated identity, and a gift for revelation as wondrous as it is stupefying, unsettling, even terrifying. The artifacts of such a creative imagination are like those dreams that fascinate and frighten us, and which we attend to because we know the dark knowledge they promise will enlighten and so, perhaps, sustain or even liberate us. As all else, dreams have a dual nature. Says the painter Linda Okazaki (and she is recalling her own difficult childhood), "If the night sky spoke to my loneliness, Orion always made me feel safe."

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Linda Okazaki's mother was murdered when she was six; her mother's dog, an African Basenji, was put down in the days that followed, and Linda's hair — which her mother had brushed and braided each morning — was cut. Her father, although loving ("He taught me how to cross a room"), was a severe alcoholic, and Linda was placed with relatives. In her words, she felt "orphaned, old, an outsider marked with otherness and impoverished." "I had," she says it simply, "lost my childhood." Yet her mind was as active as ever. She was "still in this place they call the world" (Linda quoting Rilke). Her Deep Zoo — the place of potent memories — was somehow intact and fertile. Among the powers it contained were an elephant tethered at a service station, a caged gorilla at a grocery truck stop (their predicament emblematic of her own), and loving memories of her mother braiding her hair, putting up wallpaper ("abundance!"), and sewing sequins to a tutu. That wallpaper, those sequins will show up later in paintings that are often richly, even riotously patterned. "Art," Okazaki says today, "is sorcery." Meaning art can transcend and transform anything, and her painting is a way to reach and to redeem the farthest self.

And there is the Basenji. Okazaki says that the Basenji is a link to her mother and to the unconscious. "If the loss of the mother is the loss of power" (Okazaki), the Basenji is emblematic of protection and identified with the Egyptian god Anubis. Anubis — who is portrayed as a man with the head of a jackal and whose statue, like Kaspar's little toy dog, was often adorned with red ribbon — is the one who facilitates the voyage to the netherworld. In a number of Okazaki's

most powerful and haunting (and haunted!) paintings, the Basenji, a trickster and a shape-shifter, appears as a protective spirit and accompanies the painter on a series of water crossings.

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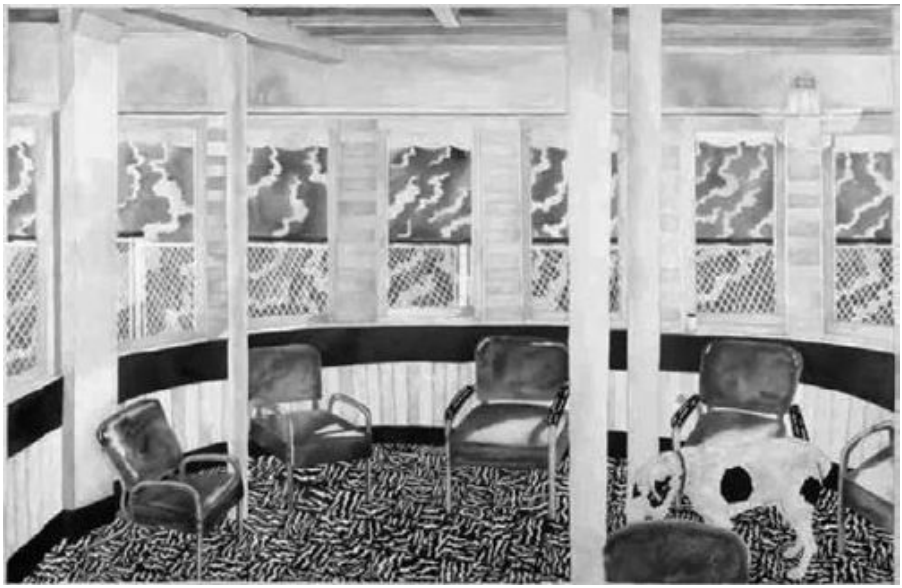
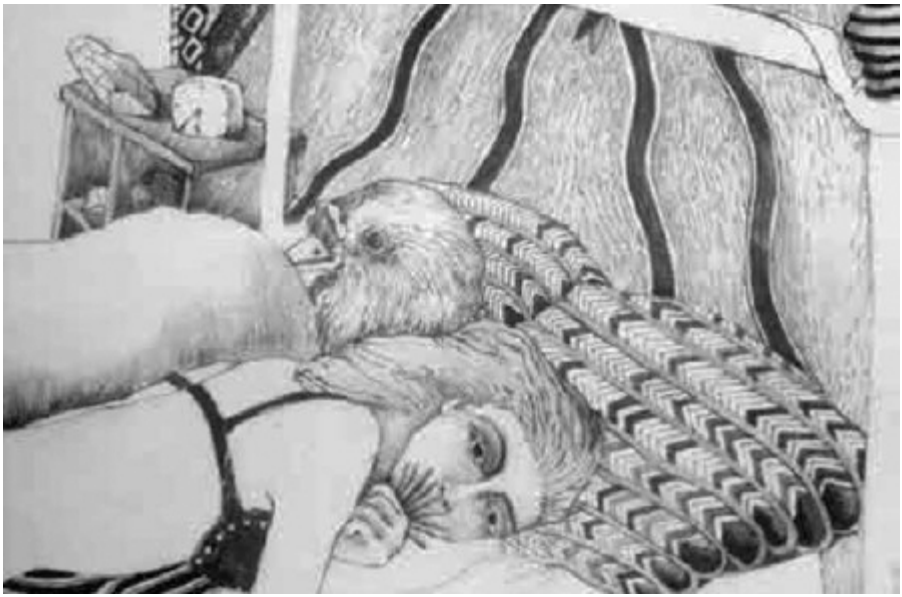
Here the familiar sundecks of the Washington State Ferries are transformed into anterooms of the underworld, liminal spaces between death and life (or, perhaps, death in life, or death leaning forward into life). In *Last Run,* the painter stands at the railing overlooking a turbulent sea, accompanied by her talismanic Basenji. Clouds roil overhead; one is in the form of a chimeric Gorgon whose lolling tongue suggests acute anxiety. Yet the Gorgon's size, position in the sky, and arched tail imply protection. "Evil protects," Okazaki says, or in other words, dark knowledge protects.



In one of many mutating identities, the Basenji appears in *Old Friends* as a dog, spotted black and white like dice, among chairs that have acquired, like tomb furniture, a stature and magnificence. Outside the sea rises like lighting. “Water,” the artist explains, “is the vessel of emotion.” As is the Basenji: if death can slam into the ordinary, killing the mother as she sleeps, the Basenji — like Okazaki’s ubiquitous water vessels (and waters of all kinds) — evokes the wellspring of the creative imagination.

As does the memory of the mother. In *Old Affection,* we see a child, designated by Fate, and her mother sharing a kiss. The child’s heavy braid demands our attention. It seems animate, a cocoon in the instant before it splits open. It has been treated like the braided grasses from which a large scarab — an amulet of rebirth — might be suspended. This painting, in which a kiss exemplifies the breath of life, recalls a ritual in which a heart or a sprig would be placed before the lips of the one who had died as a charm of reanimation. The sprig exemplifies Osiris, who stands beside Anubis and assures eternal return. In Egyptian *Woman with Bird,* the painter lies in bed beside a bird-headed lover, holding a sprig to her lips.



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In *Basenji in Egypt,* the Basenji, fused to Anubis, holds the serpent of evil, Apopis, between his paws. He has not killed Apopis, but he has immobilized him.

Okazaki's masterpiece, *The Land of Sunburned Souls,* shows a world burned to the bone and studded with stone tombs. The monstrous Gorgon reappears as a statue of stone, petrified with horror and the emblem of the painter's own powerful aversion and attraction to strong feelings, images, and archetypes. Its neck is encircled by the snake, whose realm in this instance is the realm of the worm:

They lie down alike in the dust and

the worm covers them. (Job)

Antipathy and sympathy, attraction and repulsion — these dualities assure fascination.

The worm Apopis is responsible for death in life — the death of the soul; one walks upon the worm (a gnostical idea) only to be, in the end, covered by worms. According to Job, man is himself a worm — an assertion the painter found especially troubling as a girl. An assertion she questions here in this haunting evocation of children lost to drought; children, who are the world's light after all, reduced to errant ghosts, betrayed and forgotten. This painting is a mixto and a monster, the horror and the beauty of life revealed at a glance. Just as it shows betrayal's most terrible aspect, it evokes a palpable sense of unseen forces: evil not as an absence, but a power.

But Okazaki is always a painter of unseen forces and the Egyptian Portal is only one of a multitude of ways in which to enter into the beautiful, unsettling, erotic, and necessary work of one of the Pacific Northwest's most exemplary painters. Look at this work closely; its readings are as multiple as they are mutable. And always they are marvelous.

# *Silling*

Sade completed "that most impure tale"—and the words are his—*The 120 Days of Sodom,* in the Bastille, where he was confined for infractions that, if they were outrageous, were not murderous and — unlike similar cases involving civilians in wartime — were between consenting adults. Sade was an outspoken atheist, a libertine, and a sodomist at a moment in history when sodomy was punishable by a public breaking of the offending body on the wheel. *The 120 Days* was a purposeful declaration of war against those who would never cease to persecute its author for his singularity. Like a suicide bombing, it is a cry of rage and a rending of the veil; it is an act of defiance and morbidity, the willful embrace of the role of the bogeyman — whose arbitrary and inescapable destiny is acute humiliation and a horrendous death.

*The 120 Days* is so relentlessly obscene that Sade himself declared he hadn't the stomach to revise it. Yet, when on the fourteenth of July the Bastille was stormed, and it seemed the manuscript was lost, he "shed tears of blood" because, despite its flaws, he knew he had achieved his objective: he had written a book that would never cease to do violence to its author and to the world simultaneously. And yet this novel, unlike any other, also provides a place of reflection (Sade always demands a great deal of *reflection* from his readers) and, for those who share his anomalous vertigo, perhaps release. Sade's brand of sexual recklessness, however, provokes moral disquiet, and for all its flamboyance, *The 120 Days* is less a pillow book than a novel of dystopia. Its manic relentlessness and lethal mockeries all lead to a question whose answer was a matter of urgency for Sade himself and is, more than ever, a matter of urgency for us all:

Why is it. . that in this world there are men whose hearts have been so numbed, whose sentiments of honour and delicacy have been so deadened, that one sees them pleased and amused by what degrades and soils them?

In other words, Sade, who wrote "the most impure tale that has ever been told since the world began," a book that was the measure of the horror that would, in the name of brotherhood, drench Paris with blood, was onto something. *The 120 Days* is not only a rageful (and at times rueful) procession of the author's own determinisms, it is a mirror of hell — six hundred crimes! — and like Jenin, where this morning as I write Palestinian civilians are digging in the rubble for their dead, it's a hell of human manufacture. One man's imaginary war zone, *The 120 Days* offers an occasion for necessary thoughtfulness. This is, unexpectedly, a moral novel. Sade called it his

*Book of Sorrows.*

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*The 120 Days of Sodom* opens thus:

The extensive wars wherewith Louis xiv was burdened during his reign, while draining the state's treasury and exhausting the substance of the people, nonetheless contained the secret that led to the prosperity of a swarm of those bloodsuckers who are always on the watch for public calamities, which, instead of appeasing, they promote or invent so as, precisely, to be able to profit from them the more advantageously.

Sade's satirical intention cannot be clearer. He continues:

One must not suppose that it was exclusively the low born and vulgar sort which did this swindling; gentlemen of the highest note led the pack.

Sade next offers up his "champions," the "four bloodsuckers" and "traffickers" who will "assume the major roles in these unusual orgies"; orgies that will take place in the faraway castle of Silling. They are: the Duc de Blangis and his brother the Bishop of X*** (a nobleman, therefore, and a man of the church), the celebrated Durcet, and the Président de Curval, a business and secular authority. (How much fun Sade would have had with Enron, the current scandals rocking the Catholic church, and the skeletons that continue to kick in Kissinger's closets!)

Now let us examine, beneath Sade's burning glass, his four uncharitable and immutable villains, "ces messieurs," who will live out their errant, costly lusts in Silling.

First of all, the Duc de Blangis, the inheritor of "immense wealth" has been endowed by nature "with every impulse, every inspiration required for its abuse." What's more, he was "born treacherous, harsh, imperious, barbaric, selfish. . (he is) a liar, a gourmand, a drunk, a dastard, a sodomite, fond of incest, given to murdering, to arson, to theft." His brother, the Bishop of X***, "has the same black soul, the same penchant for crime, the same contempt for religion, the same atheism, the same deception and cunning." Our financier, Durcet's loftiest pleasure is "to have his anus tickled by the Duc's enormous member." (Speculators have always been tickled by inherited wealth.) Finally — and I have purposefully saved the Président de Curval for last — we come to this "pillar of society worn by debauchery to a singular degree," who is little more than a skeleton caked with shit. Curval is exemplary of Sade's emblematic, self-hating, pleasure-fearing endeavor. He surges throughout the novel in various guises; for example, "The man from Roule who fucks in shrouds and coffins and who, familiar with the idea of death [is] hence unafraid of it." This is a sentiment familiar to those who have read the tales of torturers

whose "little ceremonies" make them feel more virile, more alive, even immortal. Like all men who torture, Sade's champions are fearful of the body and its determinisms — shit, sex, and death — and so must *shiver* it, reduce it from three dimensions to two, make it into meat:

Frigs the whore's clitoris. . chops it up with a knife

and in this way demonstrate it never had any meaning, any *individuality*. Silling's slaves are silenced, reduced to dumb beasts; their tongues may be cut out, their mouths sewn shut. Silling's victims are emptied out and flattened — as some would do to an entire country in order to establish that it was never there.

Back to Curval. He is "entirely jaded." He is, as was Sade, nearly impotent, and needs nearly "three hours of excess, and the most outrageous excess. . before one could hope to inspire a voluptuous reaction in him." Already dead, animated by fantastications and the unlimited power Silling affords him, Curval frolics in the boneyards of his making and leaps to a particularly inspired danse macabre. He embodies all of Sade's libertines, for whom the spasms of orgasm and death throes converge. This convergence never ceases to throb at the icy core of *The 120 Days* and to propulse an extremity of longing that, as time passes, seems less a boast and more a possibility:

Ah, how many times, by God, have I not longed to be able to assail the sun, snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use that star to burn the world.

The promise of "general darkness" is the shadow beneath which the universe of Silling leans into entropy, a faded universe, its ancient machinery — space and time — grinding to a deafening halt, yet capable of igniting in one last, hideous conflagration. Masters of space, Curval and the other champions toil, with furious detachment, on the side of Time; they excel in the service of its machinations. Their little ceremonies assure an eternity of agony and, paradoxically, precipitous death. (Most of the victims of Silling are very young.) As the old saw would have it, money buys time; Curval is filthy rich, and it is wealth, Sade reminds us, that enables him and the others to indulge in "unusual pastimes." Excessive wealth makes all our Sillings possible. It buys U.S. F-16S and Apache helicopters.

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Like the *One Thousand and One Nights, The 120 Days* is propelled by stories. Radical and inexorable malice is assured by the virago storytellers' unavoidable soliloquies that, "decorated with numerous and searching details. . apt to have an immense influence," commence punctually at six o'clock, like the evening news. The storytellers are moulins à paroles — word mills — whose narrations keep the mill of death oiled with cum and ceaselessly wheeling. Like the ogresses of

fairy tales or the winds of war, their mills grind bones. The sounds of bones breaking castanet the air, as do, with whirlwindish velocity, the champions' groans. To keep the mill turning, the four agree to banish rational thinking from Silling and to replace it with the logic of nightmare: "Any friend. . who may take it into his head to act in accordance with a single glimmer of common sense. . shall be fined ten-thousand francs"—a rule that could have been invented by Robespierre (who sent lace-makers to the guillotine for practicing a frivolous craft); Ariel Sharon (who, as I write, will not allow ambulances into places he has besieged, nor allow for the burial of the dead); and our own President Bush, for that matter, so eagerly gearing up for a war with Iraq.

When coupling — and their couplings are hectic and meticulous — the "messieurs," their jaded imaginations ignited by the storytellers' descriptions of bodies "reduced to scarlet shambles, of pricks stabbed with a heavy cobbler's awl, of bone-shattering cuffs," are incapable of not only compassion but erotic delight; they collide into the bodies of those they hold in thrall like tanks slamming into kitchens. Is it surprising, then, that they like to dine on shit? In Silling, sexuality is the embodiment of fury, a bloody theater, an act of terror. Like a species of athanor in reverse, Silling transmutes everything into lead.

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You will recall that in his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,* Kant proposes that each one of us "always act in such a way that you can also will that the maxim of your action should become universal law." It is evident that for the individual with a will to do good, Kant's criterion affords a rigorous practice in moral living, one that, above all, demands a searching conscience and fearless inquisitiveness, and the willingness to restlessly question dogmatic thinking — one's own and that of others — to engage in, tirelessly, a process of disenthrallment.

Sade's Silling offers a Manichean reversal and negation of such a moral practice. In Silling, Libertine Law, Universal Law, and the Law of Nature are one and the same. The friends are simply acting as Nature intends: brutally and blindly. Sade is an anti-Rousseauian (although he did admire that "threat for dull-witted bigots!") and, curiously, very much in keeping with the teachings of the Inquisition, which, fed by stories of naked New Worlders worshipping devils and buggering one another, argue that nature — a satanic realm studded with glamours and perversions; demons in the shapes of bears, wenches, and wolves; the semen of frogs and serpents teased into malefic powers — leads straight to madness. Such pessimism evokes a radical Gnosticism, proclaiming as it does man's active place in a

scheme of chronic pain and interminable night. Sade's Nature knows nothing of pity and is forever tormenting her creatures with plagues and mortifications; later, in *Juliette,* Sade will write, "Are plants and animals acquainted with mercy, pity. . brotherly love?"

Sade, always paradoxical, offers up this curiosity: he despises the church and its stultifying myths, yet climbs into bed with a churchy arsenal of crucifixes and wafers and, when it comes to Nature, embraces with a vengeance the Catholic worldview at its most extreme. It is an awkward backwardness for a man who was in so many ways a radical thinker — a champion of female sexuality, a vociferous detractor of the guillotine.

I recall a story by the Belgian writer of fantasy, Jean Ray, in which a diabolical house — much like the Aztec universe — demands to be fed fresh corpses. Silling is such a place. And "ces messieurs" are famished; their famishment, too, is cosmical. They would take on everything, even the weather:

He passes an entire brothel in review; he receives the lash from all the whores while kissing the madame's arsehole and receiving therefrom into his mouth both wind and rain and hailstones.

Such a madame, one supposes, can be nothing but the embodiment of Mother Nature.

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When the four reach Silling, they destroy the bridge that allows them access and once inside decide

it were necessary. . to have walled shut all the gates, and all the passages where the chateau might be penetrated, and absolutely to enclose themselves inside their retreat as within a besieged citadel, without leaving the least entrance to an enemy, the least egress to a deserter. . They barricade themselves to such an extent there was no longer a trace of where the exits had been; and they settled down comfortably inside.

Tomb, gnostical world hermetically sealed, Silling is colonized like a defeated country, and like terrorized civilians its slaves are given two choices only: to be corrupted (some, like certain survivors of Auschwitz, become accomplices) or to submit. All resistance, imaginary and fabricated (the slaves are given emetics and forbidden to shit), is punished by torture and execution. Never does good resist evil; it is as if Sade cannot conceive it, as if helplessness and passivity serve as puissant aphrodisiacs. Then again, the victims have always been figments only — flat, with no minds of their own. Silling is, after all, a Looking Glass world; the world of the Red Queen, whose vassals are merely cards. Among the vast store of things the four friends have brought with them are "many mirrors"; Silling, you understand, is the mirror of our most acute failures: a city under siege, a country burning

with no road leading out, a place of perfect moral isolation. If I have chosen to evoke Sade's sinister castle in this essay, it is not only because Silling's mirror of bloody ink affords an exhaustive inquiry into what a world ruled by killers is like, but because it is Silling's *banality,* after all, that should make us shudder, not its singularity.

Fantasy allows the reader to burn her own bridges and continue the tale à sa guise; to, in Sade's own words, "sprinkle in whatever tortures you like." Silling is potentially every man's fable, mirror, tomb. And if one has read *The 120 Days* to the bitter, ironical end, has one at any moment been complicitous? Has one dared acknowledge and investigate this complicity? Has the reader sprinkled in whatever tortures she likes? Or was she made too ill to think, and did she turn her head away in disgust? Fatal mistake! Or will she, will we, take up Silling's challenge and offer a refutation? One that does not entail "melting our enemies' cities," as some fool recently proposed in the *Denver* Post — a jaded response that embraces Silling's vertiginous bestiality, Sade's own longing for cosmical conflagrations. What is needed, of course, is far less simple (and shall take much more than "a single glimmer of common sense"!); it depends upon a painful and necessary disentanglement from fatal habits of mind; a lasting and muscled recognition of common humanity; an ordered, passionate vision for global justice; and a veritable *setting to rights.* Compassion — for those the hottest heads among us choose to call, without knowledge or distinction, "the enemy"—if it is to bring about peace, must be perceived as an active principle (unlike sentimentality, which is, after all, simply another form of cowardice). In order to survive our next confrontation with Silling — the calamity we will suffer or inflict upon others — we will have to, each one of us, act in the manner Kant proposes — and this if we are to, finally, overcome and abandon the pathology that dictates our unreason.

Silling, once seemingly so far, is now very close. If Sade has been so vilified — and, despite the vagaries of fashion, will continue to be, just as he always risks being embraced for all the wrong reasons — it is because Silling has never been one man's uniquely aberrant vision, but a species of accelerated perspective, an anamorphosis that, when seen through the world's own looking glass, is recognizable. Silling — like Ground Zeroes everywhere, like the killing fields that separate our country from our neighbor to the south, like our own densely populated penitentiaries — is simply another name for all our worst mistakes. It is my conviction that had we dared read Sade rigorously, dared respond to the terrible questions he poses, we might have been prepared for the worst. Silling's fires continue to burn; they gather strength and momentum.

◆

Many years ago (this was in 1965), I was invited to have tea with the French wife of the American consul in Algeria. She received me, her face slathered in cream, in a room across the street from a notorious prison. I suggested that living in such close proximity to a place where so many Algerians had been tortured during the war for independence must be a cause for much distress. But no; she told me she'd had a maid tortured there herself, for stealing silverware. "But then," she laughed, "I *found* the silverware!"

Needless to say, I didn't stay for tea, but left at once to learn soon after that the maid had been tortured so severely she had been crippled. The soles of her feet had been beaten to a pulp with heavy rods — a method perfected by the thugs of Francoist Spain. The allegresse of the consul's wife reminds me of those criminally vapid presidential debates, where Bush spoke so gleefully of the death penalty. In Curval's words,

Better every time to fuck a man than seek to comprehend him.

# *Eros Breathing*

The creative impulse, Eros breathing and dreaming within us, is radical to the core. Driven by inconstancy, restless, dynamic — it evolves. And like biological processes, it thrives on spontaneity, the necessary anomaly. A shape-shifter wired to subversion and beauty, it is also sublimely rational. Intuitive intelligence cultivates features that assure success: thorn, horn, scales, and fur; flamboyant courtship and postures; the love poem; mythmaking; the asking of riddles. The human imagination poses searching riddles, and the moment it does, poetry and science, philosophy and cosmology are born:

How does the wind not cease, nor the spirit rest? Why do the waters, desirous of truth, never at any time cease?

— Rig *Veda*

"The Riddle," Hans Jonas proposes, "is a sacred thing." One cannot help but think at once of Lewis Carroll, whose Alice is forever on the front line of the subversive and the avant-garde. Born of intuition and a deep and fearless seeing, Carroll's inspired nonsense does a devastating job of unmasking the contradictions, presumptions, and perils of Empire. When Humpty Dumpty brags:

I took a corkscrew from the shelf;

I went to wake them up myself.

Dick Cheney could be speaking. ("The Snark was a Boojum, you see.") As when certain other uninitiated Republicans succumb to an overspill of egg and explain their words were *misspoken*— spoken without their awareness. (This could be true.)

Eros (and the Alice books brim with it) and Empire are incompatible; we can easily exchange Eros for Truth (and the proof of this pudding is Bradley Manning, thrust into the treacle well for rending the veil). Empire fears and resents rational discourse, the tested intuitions, the bare facts that offer us the means to approach, unmask, and unriddle the enigmatic and vertiginous world. Writes George Steiner, "In the Gestapo cellars, stenographers (usually women) took down carefully the noises of fear and agony wrenched, burned or beaten out of the human voice." Steiner goes on to speak of "a language being used to run hell, getting the habit of hell into its syntax."

If the domain of Eros and Truth is the creative imagination — an ascendant irrational — and the child of clairvoyance and perception (and so: compassion), Humpty Dumpty and his ubiquitous tribe exemplify the abyssal irrational: reductive, determined by paranoia, shortsighted if not downright lethal. If the children of the ascendant irrational are poetry and science, the abyssal irrational suffers a deep-

seated distrust of both.

But despite the fact of their ongoing abuse, ideas and the words that convey them continue to matter — profoundly so. When on September 11, 1973, Victor Jara, the great Chilean guitarist and singer, was taken to Chile Stadium and brutally beaten, the bones of his hands broken, then dared by his captors to sing. He raised his voice and sang “Venceramos” to the five thousand others who would perish as well, and whose voices joined his own. In a poem Jara managed to write that was hidden in a friend’s shoe, are the lines,

We are ten thousand hands
Which can produce nothing
Yet in that moment in hell,
One dead, another beaten,
As I could never have believed
A human being could be beaten.

Eros, its tree of life and serpent, triumphed — the serpent, that tireless emblem of inquiry and indignation; Jara wrote:

What I see, I have never seen before.
What I felt and what I feel,
Will give birth to the moment.

We are keepers, you and I, of a special gift: if the creative impulse is to remain vital and resurgent, “The book we begin tomorrow must be as if there had been none before, new and outrageous as the morning sun,” (Ernst Block). Says Borges, “You raise your eyes and look.”

# *A Cup and a River*

As the world leans ever more precariously above the abyss and folly reaches potentially irreversible extremes, I awaken, unceremoniously, "isolated and alone"[1] in those blue hours belonging to brigands and wolves — and return to a book that, from the first reading, has offered clairvoyance and an unsurpassable vision of erotic grace. As are all the best books, *Omensetter's Luck* is unlike any other, yet conversant with those essential others that, by their very nature, persist — books you join as "a river swimming."[2] Like Brackett Omensetter himself, they manifest without warning, their turbulence unsettling and enlivening the dead water that imperils our most necessary affections and dreams.

Meteoric, *Omensetter's Luck* is a mutable book spoken in tongues, its language like the current weather, inked in a bloody hail. There are laments, laughter in gales, storms of piss and vinegar, limericks of course, headwinds, tailwinds, doldrums, squalls. And if Furber, the novel's inclement demon, unleashes a storm like things coughed up by cats, Israbestis Tot (his name a stutter and a hiss) is the resident forecaster and demiurge who gives the novel its breath (and so its *spark*).

Israbestis knows all the stories that matter: "The story of the man who went to pieces. . the saga of Uncle Simon, of the Hen Woods burning, and the hunt for Hog Bellman."[3] His tales of cats — Mossteller's, Skeleton's, and Kick's, and of the fated "fence that a good stick would make a good loud noise on it if you was to run it along"[4] —are the very stories we want, the necessary stories, miraculous as serpents who speak and apples on fire. "Imagine growing up in a world where only generals were geniuses, empires and companies had histories, not your own town or grandfather, house or Samantha — none of the things you loved."[5]

Israbestis is the one to tell Brackett Omensetter's story because he is the one to see him and survive the seeing, and this because he is something like Brackett — he appeals to children, animals, and bees; despite his bad knees, he too moves in grace of a kind. By offering us Omensetter, "this wide and happy man, dark. . deep brown like a pot of roast gravy,"[6] (a fertile clay, one supposes, adamic; a black clay), Israbestis spells an alchemical process in reverse, by which gold will be beaten down to lead. For Brackett Omensetter will suffer Adam's losses — not only the loss of possibility's garden, the garden he carries within himself, but the loving recognition of Lucy (in On *Being Blue,* Gass tells us there is a flower named the Blue Lucy!), his own Eve. Lucy who, as Brackett comes undone, will say, "Where is my

husband?"[7] She will say, "Why must we live in these lonely pieces?" She will say,

All our life till now I could live easy, breath in easy — swallow easy — loving you. It was as though you'd taken room in me. . And when I came to you with my arms before me like a present of flowers? And when I said sweet heart, dear love. . do you remember? Never a foolish name. Dear heart, I said, dear love—[8]

◆

Just as Israbestis is a wealth, a world of stories, Omensetter, "his hands as quick as cats,"[9] is himself a miracle. Dionysius, he holds "out his nature. . like an offering of fruit, his hands add themselves to what they touch enlarging them as rivers meet and magnify their streams."[10]

"Sweetly merciful God," says Henry Pimber upon meeting him for the first time, "what has struck me?"[11] Striking the world like a fallen star, Omensetter is Enkidu, his testicles "furry like a tiger's,"[12] he is "what they call the magnetic kind."[13] Like Enkidu, "no better than an animal himself"[14] and "as inhuman as a tree,"[15] he is the perfect stranger. The stranger who causes some to awaken, some to lose balance, some to catch fire. Dionysius. Feared for infecting those who see him with the fever of Trance. He is a "dream you might enter,"[16] and his smile is a "terrible wound."[17]

Such is his *miraculousness,* Henry Pimber, "obedient to some overwhelming impulse, astonished and bewildered by it though it filled him with the sweetest pleasure. . secretly thrust[s] one of [Omensetter's] tin spoons into his mouth."[18] And this in a failed attempt to heal his own split tongue, his heart broken again and again on the wheel of self-betrayal. Poor Henry Pimber! A man who, if he names the trees, hates the days. His jaw will seize up, a mirror of his soul, and if Brackett's poultice of beets will loosen it and briefly save his life, the beets will stain Lucy Pimber's temper as badly as her countertop. Having lived "little and low,"[19] "as a stone with eyes,"[20] when he falls it will be from a tree, "like an unseen leaf."[21]

But back to Israbestis, whose voice is "quieter than paws,"[22] his words like the eyes of foxes, "burning the bark from trees."[23] Burning, too, like Aladdin's lamp, the eyes of Mossteller's cat, Yorrick's skull. Agitating like worms under saucers. Word tides, fairy lights, lunar words, solar words. A god housed under every stone, every tongue. Word rivers of mutabilities, the very ones that tumbled us here — you and I — in the first place. The first word that opens Omensetter's book is *now:* a feline word, round as the first egg. Recall how things in eggs, like things in the mind, are all emanations of the initial impulse and so look alike: fish, lizard, fox, chick, Kick's cat, and every human child. Each child *is* Eros if given the chance, if allowed to grow up "in

good excitement."[24] Eros: the firstborn, the one who makes things shine, the revelation, the one for whom all stories begin. Such a child: "There's no time to him."[25] Such a one as this: "Time goes through the funnel of his fingers — click, click, click, click — like water over stones."[26] Such a one as this binds the world together, our world rent asunder time and time again by *Quarrel.*

◆

The secret of *Omensetter's Luck* is rooted in that intangible thing so unlike Lucy Pimber's dead crockery: *adoration.* As when Brackett and Lucy stand together in time's river, their flesh like lanterns, hotter even than the sun.

In this moment, and despite Furber's titanic envy — an envy that will boil and roast and devour and spit them back out very much the worse for wear — Lucy and Brackett are the children of paradise. They offer a glimpse of a universe (could it possibly be our own?) in which adoration of the other embodies all that is divine. The mutable, finite body in all its moods and poses — divine.

The sun was cool. And she like an after image still, a scar of light, a sailor's deep tattoo. She stepped from a pool of underclothing. . Then they kissed like needles. And he has a member, gentlemen, you might envy. It looked. . infinite. Beneath it. . a heap of thunderous cloud. It had risen with her rubbing as they shambled in the water. By its measure it might have been the massive ram and hammer of the gods. . Then — listen — then, so full herself, she spilled his seed, and they both laughed like gulls.[27]

A witness of this kiss, this laughter, this prick, this needling of light, one wants the story to go on forever, "to be a long one."

I want it to be a long story.

It is a long story.

Put everything in it.

I always put everything in it.[28]

◆

How can we thank you enough, dearest William, for putting everything in it? And this over and over again! All those blue books that like loving looks extend their objects into the surrounding space; books one thirsts for as one thirsts for "deep well water drunk from a cup."[29]

Of Omensetter, Henry Pimber says:

The Man was more than a model. He was a dream you might enter. From the well, in such a dream, you could easily swing two brimming buckets. In such water an image of the strength of your arms would fly up like the lark to its stinging. Such birds, in such a dream, would speed with the speed of your spirit through its body, where, in imitation of the air, flesh has turned itself to meadow.[30]

One puts down *Omensetter's Luck* and thinks, here is such a dream, such a bird, such a water, such a writer; its author: William Gass.

# *Witchcraft by a Picture*

Near the conclusion of Lost *Highway's* first sequence, the horn player sprawls beneath hell's hot eye like an astronaut lost in space. This restless and excremental eye — both a firebox and the force that dissolves and reshapes the horn player's already compromised identity — is the absolute axis of demonic intention. The compaction of Fred's soul, so palpable from the start, is now mirrored by the astriction of his body — a collapse anticipated by the recurrent implosion and resurgence of the Devil's cabin. Awash in estrangement, the enchanted horn player is suppressed, sucked in, and spat out as a fresh object of cosmical foul play. It is no accident that the doubled hero assumes the roles of musician and mechanic: Fred's horn and Peter's tool will damn him.

If the mechanic's name is Peter "Ray," his spirit is not spirited enough to save him. Reduced to a prick, he peters out — a defeat he shares with Fred and Mr. Eddie too, and that is conjured at the film's beginning and confirmed at the end by the words *Dick Laurent is dead.* And if Dick is a dead dick from the outset, so Peter too is quickly undone, his cock replaced by a gun: "Stick this in your pants," says Alice.

Lost *Highway* proposes a radically gnostic universe, one in which the material world is "some spooky stuff," overseen by an envious and envenomed deity — androgynous, fond of boasting, and whose intentions are tirelessly malicious. In gnostic terms, the body is a vampire, a prison, and a tomb; reincarnation is a highway to hell, and time and space, "this magic moment," the illusions of a fallen and deficient world, a world that is the gravity-bound sediment of a more luminous universe not given to the perfidious deceptions of space-time. The possibility of redemption explored in *Elephant Man, Blue Velvet,* and *Wild at Heart* is here entirely abandoned. In the world's "Deep Dell," everyone implodes. Even Evil's henchmen cruise the Lost Highway on a collision course.

This gnostical vision informs Lynch's other films as well. In *Mulholland Drive,* Los Angeles appears like a fallen slice of night sky or a treacly sea illuminated by a dubious and pustular phosphorescence. At any moment, the universe—"it's all on tape"—can be shut *down.* What's more, it fits neatly inside a small blue box. In *Wild at Heart,* Sailor warns Lula that "more than a few bad ideas [are] running around loose out there"; pricks like Bobby Peru are "all over," and as Lula tells it, "We're really in the middle of it now." What's more, the psychotic Dale's obscure and torturous exertions on the kitchen floor may neatly map archonic intention and intervention.

From Lost *Highway's* first moments, the camera assumes the potencies of the Evil Eye; at the end, the Evil Deity brandishes a video camera like a weapon. And if the Evil Eye is said to ejaculate venom, the contagion is holographic. It infects the picture's every aspect and, with each frame, picks up toxicity and speed.

The Evil Eye is a desirous eye, a jealous eye; the film's central male characters are not only bewitched, they are horned. Victims of the maddest sort of love, Fred and Peter (and Mr. Eddie too: "I love that girl to death") are only murderous vehicles, lesser archons of a kind.

The symbol of the Fall, the Eye is seized again and again by fatal glamours — Deep Dell's sumptuous Death Cunt—"you'll never have me" Alice/reborn Renée — a creature of the darkest looking glass, who has been around since "a long time ago"—one thinks of the whore who brought Enkidu down — and who, like the Medusa, makes men fatally hard. And if like Orpheus the horn player descends into hell for love, there is no way back. "Sweeter than wine, everything I wanna have, we could get some money and go away together"—the fabulous forgery Alice/Renée has no intention of leaving. After all, she is hell's counterfeit, a flame, a shadow, and a mindfuck in sumptuous drag. In a revelatory moment, one of many, Renée seems to be removing her makeup, yet her enchanting face remains unchanged.

In Renée's arms, the horn player is discreetly vampirized when, with a patronizing gesture, the witch — and they are notorious for this; just take a look at the *Malleus Malefacarum*—unmans him. He may well carry a horn — that classic amulet — and despite his morbid languor blow into it with vigor, but Ialdabaoth is a permanent fixture in his classy rooms — the color of fever, of flesh, of muted fire; Fred has invited him in.

Renée's caress is *fatale;* it creates a vacuum. Out of humor, on bile-green sheets, Fred might as well be an immune-deficient infant in isolation under glass. He visibly deteriorates. And when in nightmare, Renée calls his name, conjuring fire, the sexually leucemic horn player is further propelled toward meltdown.

This morbid caress is no accident. Marietta in *Wild at Heart* unmans her Johnny similarly, as does the Elephant Man's "keeper." It exemplifies the pathological nature of a world that like Sade's Silling Castle has been created for the amusement of its masters and the torment of its slaves. And Silling is brilliantly mirrored when "I like to laugh" Alice, held in Mr. Eddie's eager embrace, leers at the snuffing out of a bloodied fellow actor thrashing on Deep Dell's screen, a screen that like her twinned cunt (a witch's pupils are doubled too) is just another of hell's apertures. This same screen will illuminate Peter's crime, the scalding shimmer of Alice's infinite cinematic

possession, her “big bang” (and she’s a nightmare; like a mare, she’s fucked from behind) spilling across the murder scene like a toxic tide. Like *Blue Velvet’s* Pussy Heaven and *Wild at Heart’s* Big Tuna, Andy’s address is just another aspect of the Devil’s infinitely mutable cabin. In the submarine turbulence of Lynch’s gnostical light and shadow show, contagion, embodied by glamour-pusses and the jealous rages they inspire, is irresistible.

◆

In *Wild at Heart,* the Evil Eye manifests as Marietta’s crystal ball, the venomous halo suspended above Lula’s face as she aborts Uncle Pooch’s child, Bobby Peru’s “one-eyed Jack” too eager to defile Lula’s fresh “fish market.” But the irrepressibly erotic lovers, Sailor and Lula, despite detours, malevolence, and seductions, manage to navigate the world’s contagions triumphantly. As does that gentle anomaly, John Merrick the Elephant Man, and his morally lucid doctor.

In *The Elephant Man,* the Evil Eye is the public eye, profiteering and tyrannical. Burdened by gravity more than anyone, John Merrick is victimized less by his visibility than by his fellows’ blindness. His spirit, so like Kaspar Hauser’s (and their stories are similar), remains transcendent. This spirit radiates from his eyes so that the monstrous mask falls away and one sees — as do his protectors — only a luminous being.

The staged marvels that unfold for Merrick’s pleasure so shortly before his death evoke the films Joseph Cornell made for his infirm brother, and Kaspar Hauser’s redeeming memory of a magic lantern show. Perceived with innocence, these marvels seem to flood our dark planet from some far brighter star, causing all our nightmares to dissolve, as a witch is said to do in water.

Merrick’s aberrant condition robs him of breath and voice. But when he manages to speak, it is to express acute delight in the things of this world: some crystal flasks, a tea service, clean clothes, and above all, a photograph of someone beloved.

# *The World in a Seed: The Art of Anne Hirondelle*

Several years ago the Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei filled the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall with one million hand-painted porcelain replicas of sunflower seeds. The experience of Ai Wei Wei's installation was one of deeply felt joy and mindfulness.

◆

The seed is emblematic not only of potency, but of the initial impulse that engenders a universe, a universe characterized by mutability and so: multiplicity. If a seed appears to be finite, its greatest mystery is its capacity to produce an infinite number of replicas that — unlike Ai Wei Wei's porcelain seeds — are self-transforming. It is easy to forget that the Real's myriad and shifting forms began with a single impulse and in a single instant, and that everything evolves (and devolves), including the creative imagination. Which brings me to a recent experience of the mutable and the marvelous, when I stepped into a sunlit room and saw Anne Hirondelle's recent ceramic sculptures, which, if not replicas of a seed, brought a seed to mind — the one the ancients of India called bīja. Bī ja is a seed syllable (the familiar Om is another) said to contain and, when spoken, precipitate the primal spark. In other words, it is both the container and the vehicle of causality. It is the potential event from which everything arises.

To give breath to the seed syllable by saying it aloud is an act of reverence, an acknowledgment of the sacred. And it evokes the material world, causing "all this" (idam sarvam) to incandesce within the mind. (For the Japanese Buddhists who embraced the idea of the b īja — they called it shuji — the writing that embodies "all this" is beautiful and timeless, and it is spontaneous; it is irregular. In other words: it *evolves.*)

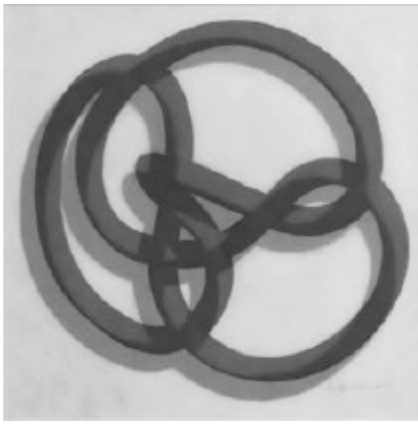
Entering into Anne Hirondelle's studio I thought, she has made seed syllables! She has made bīja! She calls them: *Re: Volves.* High-fired, made of stoneware, and painted rather than glazed, these seeds of hers are also planets. In stillness and in silence, they are poised to spin into orbit. They bring to mind the cogs of some sort of celestial machine. Perhaps the wheel of the Zodiac as Roberto Calasso describes it, "girding the world obliquely like a sash, like a many colored sash." And, perhaps, they are the mirror of "the mind's back and forth, its inconstancy."[1]

Or. . the inner lives of the planets and their influence on the space in which they spin, this action reduced to a formula that is palpable as

well as visible. Or maybe. . (you see how these objects *seed* the mind!) the letters of an alphabet in three dimensions, but implying at least four, embodying perfection, beautiful and timeless, but also spontaneous and irregular — which is exactly how the Japanese Buddhist describes the bīja You see: the *Re: Volves* refuse immobility, and instead gyre and gimble in the mind's wabe. (At one point she considered calling them Gyres.)

The *Re: Volves* have themselves evolved from an entire galaxy of mutations in clay as well as pencil on tracing paper, beginning with the *Turnpool,* the *Outurn,* a series called *Go;* her *Abouturns,* then *Tumble, Remember* (and there is a theory that the memory is as essential to our universe as is gravity), *Re: Form, Extrapolation.* Her *Re: Coils* appear to be under tension, ceaselessly spooling and unspooling, never static but always transforming, like those springs said to be vibrating at the deepest heart of everything, smaller than anything we can imagine, let alone measure. .

Perhaps this is what this work is telling us: if we could somehow see with our naked eyes at the smallest distance scales, we would know that "all this" is beautiful, always in flux, mindful, and oscillating.



# *A Memoir in the Form of a Manifesto*

When I was a child of seven, I spent the week alone with my mother's parents, Frances and Charlie. They lived in Miami, in a house that smelled of boiled carrots. Frances's conversation was featureless, and I could never, for as long as I knew her, grow accustomed to the static condition of her mind.

A Russian immigrant who came to this country at the age of twelve, Charlie had one good story. He told it slyly and with dash: the moment his family had debarked in New York City he had run away, and before the day was over had snagged a job with the Barnum & Bailey Circus shoveling elephant shit.

Charlie's vivid evocation of elephant shit in all its prodigious redundancy did much to alleviate my grandmother's self-righteous banality. If Charlie was entertaining — and he also had enlightening things to say about the Fat Lady (in those days a rarity) and had witnessed an acrobat's fatal mistake — Frances was not. She thought of herself as a worldly realist, yet she feared the world unreasonably, poisoning the ants on her slice of lawn with a fixity of purpose. She boiled our suppers with such ferocity that everything we ate tasted like wet laundry. It was during this visit that I came to privately call her Old Piano Legs.

Suppertimes, Charlie, mostly mute, and sucking the interminable sourballs that would give him stomach cancer, thought of the lady across the way who — or so I learned from a bitter Frances at his funeral some years down the line — made a mean lamb stew with dumplings.

"He'd go across the way to eat her stew!" she had blustered. "Can you imagine that?" I could.

◆

I had brought with me a library book devoted to van Leeuwenhoek. In the deep solitude of Miami nights, I would lose myself beneath the Dutchman's magic lens, and swim among the minute creatures he described gyrating in gutter water and tears. The splendid conjunction in my mind of elephants and animals too small to be seen with the naked eye caused me to shudder with secret laughter, for I knew it was best not to disturb Frances's mortal certitude with any extravagance of mind. (Her own mind was made of sandbags that, whenever she would speak, tumbled forth in such quantity one feared, one *risked,* suffocation.) In this way her conversation had a family likeness to the inescapable redundancies of so much so-called "realistic" fiction. (This brings to mind my mother's response to my first "real" story: "Some nightmares are best kept to

oneself." She died soon after this exchange; it was, as it turned out, the last time she advised me.)

◆

Charlie's fond recollections informed my own tendency to scatologize, and decades later, made for an immediate affinity with Angela Carter, whose dinner conversation was outrageously fecal and funny. Angela, like Jonathan Swift and Robert Coover and Rabelais, was unafraid of frass. Which has me wondering if the acknowledgment of materiality goes part and parcel with the unfettered imagination, a healthy dislike of pomposity and the sort of dogmatic thinking that insists the body is both fallen and vile. (I was about to write a *healthy* acknowledgment of materiality, but then, like the divine Marquis's, Swift's interest in dung was, need I say it, *morbid.*)

Back to Miami: on the one hand there was Frances, who, if she'd had the choice, would have shat chalk. Whereas Charlie proposed a vision of excrement transcendent, intuiting — for this he could not have known — how in Old Tibet the Dali Lama's turds were kept in silver and worn as amulets — a true story, if anomalous. But there is more. Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa or Bruno Schulz's paterfamilias thrashing in aspic, that week the fantastic claimed Miami with a suddenness that suggested the miraculous. For three days land crabs by the tens of thousands overswarmed lawns, sidewalks, driveways, carports, and Grandma's rockery. As agile as hands, they were stunning in their sheer exuberance. Agitating in the dew of early morning and at night beneath the glazed lunes of porch lights, they could not have unraveled Frances more had they been communist transvestites herding penguins. Wildness had claimed Miami — irresistible, irreverent, infidelic, profane! Frances, who until that moment had tirelessly elbowed her way through life, was shut down. After a few minutes of ineffectual sweeping, she took to her bed with an ice pack. I recall how Charlie and I stood on the backporch and marveled at the unprecedented event; how from across the way the lady who had a knack with dumplings gaily waved.

◆

We are told that within the decade global warming will slap us silly, and that within forty years or so, one third of all living things will have perished irretrievably. A criminal lack of imagination is making of our fragile world a flatland. We are told that flat, like fear, is good for us, somehow *suitable;* fear and boredom fit us better, like those mass-produced and outgassing polyesters that cover the nakedness of our presidents and late-night hosts and bankers with a doleful inevitability. But I will have none of it. And I decry the rise of plastic and the decline of fur; the confusion of capitalism and

democracy; the tyranny of religion and the dereliction of moral vision; the lethally misguided notion that like *suitable* ideas, the creative impulse must know and keep its place; that art and literature, like trousers and radishes, are no more than commodities.

A world worth wanting cherishes the risks of wildness, and this includes not only the lavish elephants and meteoric crabs, but the stars we can no longer see; the whales hemorrhaging on our beaches; the serene mollusks and coral reaches; *Gilgamesh* as filmed by the Brothers Quay; the eroticized Martians imagined by Clarice Lispector; the Amazon's poison frogs; the Sahara's thick-coming locusts; the vociferous parrots; William Gass's *Omensetter;* the worms in their legions and the yellow boas; Rosamond Purcell's and van Leeuwenhoek's third eyes and Borges's Aleph; the oracle at Delphi and Gaudí's dream of an unbounded architecture; the necessary nightmares of David Lynch; Borges's incandescent blindness; Prince Genji's amorous encounters; the unstoppable mulattas of Latin American literature; the collages of Max Ernst, his loplop, and, above all, the salutary tradition of a tusked and savage — and, need I say it: *subversive* storytelling in which the world is reinvented, rein-vigorated, and restored to us in all its sprawling splendor, over and over again.

# *The Practice of Obscurity*

# PART I

*In these passes long ago I saw lions, I was afraid and I lifted my eyes to the moon*

*— The Epic of Gilgamesh*[1]

One cannot speak of obscurity without considering the shadows that accumulate with growing intensity around us. Not the animating shadows Gaston Bachelard evokes, which offer a place in which to dream (although I would engage these and other marvelous exemplars of the Beautiful Obscure: the lacquerware Jun'ichirō Tanizaki describes, whose gilded enhancements surge into view at the lick of a flame; Roger Caillois's Brazilian onyxes — those rich, dark surfaces that, steeped in the eternal fog of a mineralogy museum, catch an errant beam of light and are suddenly transformed into Books of Nature), but the lethal opacities of Sade's Silling — that bloody castle rising above a blasted world; the stubborn weather of *La Bêtise* Goya mastered in ink; the night at noon, when a man is made to stand beneath the sun with his head tied in a sack; the Sadean nights of Abu Ghraib; the midnight body of Matthew Shephard hanging from a fence; a night in which Blake's torch of a tiger is extinguished, and Borges, that other tireless dreamer of tigers, is deprived of sleep; those redundant terrestrial shadows in which *night after night, hour after hour,* Chronos devours his son in the vanished shade of the cedars, among the vanished shadows of the feral creatures that illuminate or fail to illuminate our defective dreams.

To snatch away from us even the darkness beneath trees that stand deep in the forest is the most heartless of crimes.

— JUN'ICHIRŌ TANIZAKI, *In Praise of Shadows*[2]

◆

When I was a small child, our nearest neighbor — and he was a poultry farmer — candled eggs for me. One by one the eggs surrendered their opacity and, should they have one, revealed their secret. In this way the farmer knew when the yolks were doubled, and it would have pleased him to hand me a box of twelve such prodigies. Sometimes the candle revealed a spot of blood or a nascent chick rooted to the yolk like a tiny fiddle-head fern rolled up upon itself. In this way, I saw how in the beginning an animal is a kind of plant.

My first childhood room — and its floor was covered in deep blue linoleum — looked out on the meadow where our neighbor's chickens meandered and sometimes managed to perch in the low-growing

trees. Stretched out on the linoleum, I contemplated another mystery, which protracted the delicious experience of candling: a hollow Easter egg made of hard white sugar and provided with a thimble-sized diorama. I recall gazing for hours with longing at an idealized version of my window view: a miniature meadow in which a hen sat with her chicks in what seemed to be perfect silence and kindness. The paradise contained within the sugar egg cast a spell within the room and extended to the chicken yard across the street; it too was silent and ordered in my mind. Even now, and although I know it is impossible, the chicken yard is as still as a museum diorama, and as mysterious. Mysterious because it is the first landscape I pondered. Mysterious as the little wood behind the house rife with sumac and garter snakes and skunkweed and red foxes. And there was a song I loved then about a fox who goes out on a dark and stormy night to raid a chicken coop and bring a chicken dinner back to his family, who wait for him in the lair. The refrain went something like this:

And the little ones gnawed on the bones, O!
The bones O, the bones O!
And the little ones chewed on the bones!

The meadow, its hundreds of white birds, the sumac, the foxes, the neighbor's kitchen, his gentle hand holding up a candled egg for me to see — all of these are held in thrall behind the glass of memory. And like a magic lantern image projected within a darkened room, they appear in isolation from everything else. One's childhood is like that dark room, illuminated by the most precious, the most incongruous things!

One morning the neighbor showed me his treasure: a twoheaded chick kept in a jelly jar and floating in alcohol. This memory is dynamic and allows me to recall what it was to be six years old, fully alive and sparked by something strange and terrifying and beautiful. The two-headed chick is perpetually stimulating because it is the first event in a series of events that sparked my imagination in a novel, an unsettling, and so, salutary manner. As did the linoleum I have mentioned, which, in the shadows of evening, became an unfathomable sea of indigo water studded with yellow islands barely large enough to stand on. Tiptoeing across that linoleum, I risked my life. I knew that the thread that anchored me to the world was as delicate as the thread that anchored the forming chick to its yolk. And I had seen how the monstrous could surge forth unexpectedly from a thing as prosaic as an egg. The two-headed chick was the indication of questions I could not even begin to ask, and like the shadow games I played each evening on the linoleum, it offered a sprawl of fantasy and a troublous delight. I think it trained me in a certain kind of looking.

To look at the anomalous chick was to be given access to something precious, which, in the half-light of evening, took on a kind of substance and immediacy. This something precious had all to do with reverie, a restless imagining. The yellow islands were all the islands of the mind burning brightly in the safety of my own private darkness. They were places of essential and dangerous beauty — dangerous because they were somehow forbidden, anomalous, maybe truly monstrous. The linoleum games offered also a taste of infinity because they disrupted categories and suggested new ones. In the shadows of my room, I lived in the land of conjecture.

When one is six, many questions cannot be asked because they cannot be formulated let alone intimated.

◆

Two years pass; it is summer and there are eight of us. We play pirates, Clue, cops and robbers, Old Maid, games of Goose, poker, cowboys and Indians, and the games of our own invention. We play at hide-and-seek, and I pride myself on the fact that I am hard to find. The year is 1951, and Senator McCarthy's brand of obscurification is packing steam. Our fathers are college professors, and we are aware that the lethalities of the moment might possibly reach us, as might the fallout from Russian nuclear devices. There is the threat of Martians and, to a lesser degree, vampires. The brother of a classmate has been crippled by polio, and another child has drowned. Shadows, then, of one kind and another. Our knowledge of the world is both intimate — the campus where our fathers teach, the woods, the Hudson River — and vastly incomplete. But as I am about to discover, the essential things that are kept from children will manage to surge into the day. And it may even be that the darkness is a place of safekeeping.

So. The game is hide-and-seek, and the afternoon is on the wane. We scatter and I run into a vacant lecture hall — which is surely cheating — and up three flights of stairs. At the end of a dim corridor is an unlocked door, and suddenly I find myself standing in a beautiful room, spacious, its ceiling impossibly high — so high it seems the room has its own atmosphere. In fact, the air in that room smells strange, not familiar at all; not quite terrestrial. Recently I came upon an obscure reference to a room where the angels — and I don't believe in angels — were said to receive their instructions. In my memory, this room seems a likely place. Because I am about to find what I have, unaware, been seeking. It is the one thing each child — the child who has only recently left her tail, her gills behind — seeks. The human child who is always as eager to encounter a turtle as she is a tiger or a triceratops — because she knows (and her knowledge is innate and intimate) that they are all her tribe.

Imagine a vast rectangular room, its west wall taken up with vertiginous windows. In the east the sun hangs high above the roof, and the room is heavy with shadows. The entire east wall is taken up with cabinets fronted with glass; glass spills to the floor like heavy water. The cabinets are old and pocked with bubbles; the glass is of uneven thickness. Like the restless objects of desire that elude Alice's eyes in the sheep's shop in Wonderland, the things in the cabinet are both appealing and enigmatic.

The sun slides down a notch and then another. And like an animated ink, the shadows within the cabinet begin to leak; they recede. The sun slides down another notch. Light floods the room and in that white air the objects within the cabinet catch fire. They twinkle.

Now imagine that you see sideral space clearly chartered. It is as if peering down a black hole you see your own face reflected in a pool. The most essential knowledge, until then glimpsed within the candled egg and the jelly jar, perceived but never before truly considered, hangs suspended in an ordered sequence — star after luminous star.

Look: here is the modular chicken, the entire progress of its gestation bared to the eye, and here: a fetal cat in levitation. To the left a single natal lizard, and above, one preliminary lamb. All this announces the greatest treasure of all: the dizzying itinerary of the human fetus; it rides the afternoon across an entire shelf. Each and every one of its gestures is expressive and luminous. And we are privileged; we are looking at the alphabet of sparks that spell the world. Some are as mute as water, some hiss like fire, some respire: this is the breath that reconciles water and fire. Here are all the points of departure: an alphabet of eyes, of the organs of speech, the five places of the human mouth, the 231 formations made tangible out of the intangible air. The one name, the one flame that cannot stand still; clairvoyance, the small intestines like seaweed floating toward the beach; the child's face cut from fresh clay with a knife of green leaves; the lotus flower upon which Buddha sits; a serpent at the world's edge, the embodiment of time's passage, the twelve constellations, the twelve organs of the body. All that had been baffling, hermetic, unfolds, exquisitely palpable. And we know, without a doubt, that the ark is contained within each of us.

Like the things in the cabinet, the experience of that afternoon is not static but mutable. It is active and provides for infinite permutations. Effortless, it propels itself into the future, informing, *precipitating* what is to come. It is a potency that, ever after, heightens a certain kind of experience, a way of seeing and so of being. The lucent cabinet of wonders is emblematic of all optical delight — the

cinema, for example, where, if the film is a good one, one shares an experience of profound intimacy in the dark with perfect strangers. And those antique pleasures that — should one be of a certain temperament — persist: the wistful stereopticon with its sepia views of vanished cities, the magic lantern, whose evening projections on the kitchen wall offer recollections of a planet as green as a freshly hatched garden snake. Need I mention objective hazards: the anamorphoses that suddenly ignite a shop window in the rain, and this just after one has been introduced to them in Baltrušaitis's magical book. And I recall one unforgettable and consummately Parisian day in which four museums offered a seemingly inexhaustible bouquet of consecutive hasards objectifs: first, at the Jardin botanique, plants that look like minerals; then in the Galerie de Minéralogie, minerals behaving like trees; after, across the street, in the Galerie de Zoologie, animals imitating flowers; and finally, in the Louvre, a pharaonic planter in the shape of Osiris, in which the god, greening, is made eternal.

Recently I returned to the Natural History Museum in New York City to roam through the halls I have loved since infancy. The museum's theaters of nature are famous for their rigorous beauty and because they conjure the dynamic and even thoughtful intimacy of creatures within their worlds. Carefully assembled, they convey a palpable tenderness for their subjects and offer, as if seized in clear ice, a glimpse of Eden, that rich domain. They remind us that our supposed separateness from nature is the most impoverished of illusions. These days, the visit evokes the morgue because so many of these marvelous creatures have been pushed over the edge into oblivion. And even if we manage to clone them and bring their bodies back, still they will be nothing more than the living dead, burglarized out of context, of substance, of meaning.

One could say that it is a human practice to obscure the things one loves. Consider the Dutchman Van Heurnis, who depleted entire countries of moles. He was — and the words belong to Stephen Jay Gould—"a hyperacquisitive finder" and "a meticulous keeper." His collections of small mammals could be mistaken for stashes of rundown bedroom slippers, but apparently they satisfied Van Heurnis's unbridled curiosity — which was admirable, his very human delight in order, the mammal's need for satiety; in other words: a full larder.

There is another aspect to this collection: those things Van Heurnis had no time to catalog, like this uncurated jar. Here the photographer has prodded the anomalous apple so that it bobs besides the serpent's ravening mouth. The ravening mouth is essential. After all, the salutary serpent will not allow us to settle into the dotage of complacency and demands that we question the necessity of our proliferating body bags and bloody chambers. In other words, he continues to infect us with the salutary venom of disobedience.

In Rosamond Purcell's photograph, each element is the child of shadow and light; the jar offers a glimpse of the terrestrial stew, an emblematic and cosmological cookery: a fetal pig, moles, mice, a snake, a doubled apple, cat guts, a slug, a frog, a toad. . The jar is a celebration not only of subversion, but its snake and its apple have all to do with domesticity. For if Eve broke the rules, her other intention was to keep a garden. And if the apple is the one she bakes into a pie, it is also the one that poisons Snow White and renders her comatose. Here in this jar, roiling with things and the shadows of things, is the theater of our private dilemma: how to sip the salutary venom that inspires an unfettered individuality, a fearless vitality and sexuality,

yet aspire to domestic bliss, the larder replete with bread and beasts, the bedroom secure?

The household? Or the dance of light and shade? The apple not for cookery but witchery? Purcell's doubled apple mirrors our inherent duality; the light and shadow within us is as closely joined as this kitchen monster in its keeping medium is twinned.

# PART II

> *He saw the lions round him glorying in life; then he took his axe in his hand, he drew his sword from his belt and he fell upon them like an arrow from the string, and struck and destroyed and scattered them.*
>
> *— The Epic of Gilgamesh3*

In the distant past, there was the idea that all things gave and received energy. This exchange was vital and it was essential. It was thought that a very real correspondence existed between all creatures and things — minerals, the living soil, the living waters, plants. Much as a letter is sent and awaits an answer, these gave and received from one another.

And there was the magical idea that the structure of a thing was connected with its name; that to change the name was to change its inherent qualities. Such as Adam, who is formed of clay: *adamah.* Adamah is an active principle; it refers to the tilled soil and the earth with which one builds an altar. And, its color is red. *Dam* is the word for blood.

Adam's nature is also volcanic. He is made in darkness, in secret, deep within the earth, and he is red with fire. The early stage of his creation is called *the glowing.* There is an ancient book written in Syriac in which Adam's face is described as being as beautiful as the sun. His body and his face, his eyes — all glow mightily like the sun. So you see, Adam cannot be disassociated from his name. He is red hot, volcanic, earthly, magnetic.

Plato tells us that every living thing is hot and has a flame residing within it. When in the darkness God breathes into Adam's nostril and brings him to life, this breath is called *nefach:* the breath that kindles fire.

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Once, a person had two names: a secret name that assured his safety and potency, and a serviceable, everyday name. Creatures and plants — like the owls and lotus blossoms and willow trees of Egypt — had names whose very sounds were the instruments of spiritual energy. But when Adam gives names to things of fire and breath, his singular power, his privilege, and his alienation, are openly declared, and Eden's capacity to inspire and regenerate is compromised.

Moral complexity is not Adam's forte, nor is clairvoyance. He is

the son of Yahweh after all, and domination is to his taste. Like a grocer, he parcels out the animals: those that creep upon their bellies and thrive in confusion — the venomous scorpion, the snake — these he despises. The docile cattle he enthralls, and in envy, fear, and ignorance, demonizes the wild beast. The intuition that all forms surge from the same flame, the same breath, and that all living things are siblings — Adam obscures.

Which brings us to another seminal myth that persists not only because of its tragic beauty, but its psychological acuity: the story of Enkidu, that other *man-as-he-was-in-the-beginning,* and Gilgamesh his king. The story of Enkidu and Gilgamesh is, above all, one of alienation and guilt, of notoriety confused with and exchanged for eschatological salvation, and an ecstatic journey devolving into a progression of violent and self-defeating acts that lead to an apocalypse — the very apocalypse we face: the obscuration of Nature. In this way it can be read as a parable of our own age in crisis.

Gilgamesh the king is above all a builder of cities, and the story opens with a walk through Uruk, a great city masterfully built of oven-fired brick. One third of Uruk is given over to quarries of clay, and close at hand the forests provide fuel for the kilns. This is how Gilgamesh makes his mark upon the world, in brick. And he is like a brick wall. A tyrant and a rapist, he is unyielding and incontournable. So abusive has he become, the gods are called upon to intervene. And so, in silence, "The goddess conceives an image in her mind; she dip[s] her hands in water and pinche[s] off clay which she let[s] fall in the wilderness."[4] A falling star, Enkidu blazes to Earth.

Like Adam, Enkidu is made of clay; like Adam, he glows. Born of fire and breath, I think he is like the sacred vowels of the Arabs, which open the door to sublime understanding. Vowels like the *Mîm*, the *Wâw,* and the *Nûn* that Ibn ʻArabî describes so passionately — that have no beginning and no end and contain the infinite possibilities of the created, the imagined world. Such is Enkidu's promise: a lucent world of infinite possibility. A savage man, he lives in perfect understanding among the creatures of the forest. It is significant that before he is made he is dreamed. Above all, the epic of Gilgamesh is a revelation of the profound significance of dreaming.

Word of Enkidu's strength and beauty reaches the king. But before they meet, Enkidu blazes into Gilgamesh's dreams, first as a meteor too heavy to be lifted and then as a gleaming axe fallen to the street. When he asks his mother the meaning of his dreams, she tells him Enkidu is "the brave companion who rescues his friend in necessity."[5] Yet the only thing Gilgamesh needs to be rescued from is himself. The great builder of Uruk has gone terribly astray. Like a bright blade in the mind, Enkidu has been made not only to stop him,

but to transform him.

A spark that dissolves the night, a fallen star, and also Gilgamesh's twin, his mirror, the revelation of his entombment — the meteor's terrible weight exemplifies the king's affection, his leaden soul. His name obscured, Gilgamesh's agony will become his own.

As you will recall, a temple whore is sent into the forest to seduce Enkidu and weaken him. His match in sexual vitality, they come together like forces of nature. Enkidu gluts on her richness and abandons his innocence for her own brand of wildness — an artful and deceitful sexuality. First she exhausts him, then she makes a man of him, a bread-eater and a killer. He is now ready, like any thug, to wrestle with the king and lose. He is reduced to Gilgamesh's hireling, his "axe" and his shadow. "I am weak," Enkidu laments. "My arms have lost their strength, the cry of sorrow sticks in my throat."[6] Debased, robbed of selfhood, Enkidu is prepared to destroy everything he loves. When he dies, it will be in shame. He will say, "Once I ran for the water of life, and now I have nothing."[7] The luminous dreaming of the story's beginning collapses into nightmare.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh set off together to destroy the cedar forest, its tree of life — which Gilgamesh will have made into a door — and Humbaba, the forest's ferocious protector. Like the rich domains Herodotus describes weeping incense and rife with beasts, the forest grows on a mountain. The cedar mountain is not only home to all the gods, but it stands above the palace of Irkalla, the Queen of Darkness. The place of all our darkest fears and greatest potencies, it exemplifies the unconscious mind. It is, the text tells us, the place from which dreams are sent to men, and on their journey, Gilgamesh will not cease to dream. These dreams will never encourage both men but will always be warnings of the mortal damage they are about to inflict upon themselves and their world. And it is no accident that once the forest has been destroyed, torn up by its roots, Gilgamesh will fall speechless to the ground, weighted down in the terrible dark of nightmare. He tells Enkidu,

I seized hold of a wild bull in the wilderness, it bellowed and beat up the dust till the whole sky was dark, my arm was seized and my tongue bitten. .

I dreamed again. We stood in a deep gorge of the mountain, and beside it we two were like the smallest of swamp flies; and suddenly the mountain fell, it struck me.[8]

Driven by the fear of his own eclipse, Gilgamesh pushes on, eager when Enkidu — now nothing more than the embodiment of the king's worst instincts, his *demon*—reassures him. In his youth, Gilgamesh had seen dead bodies floating in the swollen rivers. He is aware that his glory is nothing more than a "breath of wind." And he knows that if

he destroys Humbaba, even if he dies in the attempt, his name will persist. This is what fatally drives Gilgamesh: the idea of an interminable name. And there is something else, a kind of helpless rage and fearfulness. Gilgamesh can do nothing to evade the underworld. Only the gods have access to heaven. Here, as Enkidu dreams it, is the underworld of Mesopotamia: submerged in darkness, the dead sit together like blind and flightless ravens, with only their wings to hide their nakedness. The dead sit in silence in the dust and the shadows and they eat clay. This is how Gilgamesh and Enkidu will spend eternity: lamenting in obscurity, incapable of dreaming.

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Perhaps this is the Real's greatest paradox: it must be dreamed in order to be lived. After all, to dream the Other is to dispel the shadows of distrust and prepare for the initial encounter. Before he falls into the world, the child is dreamed. As is the lover, embraced in a reverie that is the gift of clairvoyance. Or the city one imagines, before walking its streets — Paris, Oaxaca, San Cristobal, Baghdad. When it is dreamed, the real flourishes like a garden. But one must, as Italo Calvino says, dare dream very high dreams.

When he was a child of three, Jorge Luis Borges saw a tiger at the zoo; a delightful little drawing of the tiger, Borges's Aleph, his Zahir, survives. Borges's biographer suggests that the tiger seized his imagination because, like Borges's own father, it was beautiful, impossible to approach, powerful, and enigmatic; dangerous, perhaps. This tiger became the primary potency that animated that necessary writer's imagination. Which was the tiger that enabled Borges to become Borges? Was it the Javanese, the Balinese, the Caspian? Three tigers that are now extinct. Three tigers that have been obscured forever.

In the jail at Nighur, the governor showed him a cell whose floor and vaulted ceiling were covered by a drawing (in barbaric colors that time, before obliterating, had refined) of an infinite tiger. It was a tiger composed of many tigers, in the most dizzying of ways; it was crisscrossed with tigers, striped tigers, and contained seas and himalayas and armies of what resembled other tigers.[9]

[The] animals race by. .[10]

— Once upon a time there was a parrot whose entire body trembled with passion when it sang.

Friends, it will be lonely.

— There was once an owl who called out to its companions telling of rain, and who cherished accordion music.

There are lonely times ahead.

— Once a macaw the color of lapis lazuli.

Our children will be wistful for those things that tell them who

they are. .

— A giant sea tortoise whose flesh, according to Pliny, was an excellent remedy for the bites of salamanders.

The marvelous lineage of the living.

— A fish who cautiously carried her young in her mouth.

Wistful, they will want to see the vanished lions.

— Like the lion that continues to prowl the alchemical manuscripts, sometimes with the sun held in his teeth.

And if our limits are determined by the opacity of others, the obscurity of our own intentions and desires, the hidden neurosis that saps our energy and capacity for lucency. .

— Once birds flew in such numbers their bodies obscured the sun. They made a sound “like a hard gale at sea passing through the riggings of a close-reefed vessel” (Audubon). They made a sound like the rattling of many thousands of small bells in the fists of as many children.

— Once there was a country rich in moles; and a large bird whose skin was used for lining boots.

Flocks of butterflies,

Waves breaking upon waves.[11]

In this sea of enigmas.[12]

— Once upon a time there was a bird — I think I said this — whose wings made a sound like a hard gale at sea. .

O merveille, un jardin parmi les flammes![13]

# *Candles of Ink*

The French occupation of Algeria began in the early nineteenth century. It was characterized by a brutal disregard for the Algerian people, Berber and Arab alike, whose languages, cultures, and landscapes were violently disarticulated. Torture shaped Algeria's war for independence, as did genocide and the massive deportation of people who died by the tens of thousands in concentration camps.

I lived in Algeria from 1964–1966, and have brooded ever since over the horror of what happened there — horror that continues to shape the present for us all. In the winter of 1964–1965, my then-husband and I hitchhiked from Constantine — in the north — to the southern oases of Biskra, Touggourt, and Ouargla, where we were picked up by a truck driver who was carrying baryte — a kind of barium used in the making of cement — to an American oil rig deep in the desert, at an unnamed place between Hassi ben Harrane and Temassmin. In the middle of the night, he left the road to navigate by the stars. I recall that the lights from the rig became visible hours before we reached it, and that no oil had been found. They were digging in six hundred meters of salt.

Although the violence had ceased about seventeen months earlier, the war had left traces everywhere. They were visible in the scarred mountains that had been mined, the many villages burned to the ground, the immense napalmed areas along the Tunisian border, and on the face of the truck driver, who had been tortured for weeks with live electric wire. The burns had left a kind of indigo script at the corners of his nostrils, his mouth and eyes, and in the delicate hollows beneath his ears. His dignity, he claimed, was recovered at the moment of his country's independence; the term he used was *self-determination.* He told us that throughout his ordeal, he had refused to speak. That now it pleased him to eat and to sleep "in his own time." During that long night, he did not eat nor drink.

The novel I am currently writing is an attempt to enter into his country's tragic story, and to reconstruct my memories of that extraordinary time and place. Because, if I shall always be a trandji — and this is a marvelous Arabization of the French word *étranger,* or "foreigner"—a forty years' haunting demands, at the very least, a leap of faith and mind.

◆

The early Arab scholars named the first language lughat sûrryâniyya: the language of the sun's illumination. The hot bones and breath of this language of light persist and are revealed in a book written by the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabî, called *The*

*Book of Mîm, Wâw, and Nûn.* Vowels that like snakes bite their own tails, the *Mîm, Wâw*, and *Nûn* are the tangible expressions (not to be confused with artifacts) of the original event. They are the sparks that ignite the "sacred community of letters" and curiously, they are also the "sublime dwelling" that contains the promise of the entire alphabet. Written in candles of ink, sacred texts are secreted in the bodies of calligraphic lions and mazes and mazed trees of life. I should add that the Koran calls things that are concealed katta: rendered calligraphically And that in Arabic, the verbs "to write" and "to release" are one and the same.

To animate the dry bones of overuse and to illuminate the riddles of divine intention, the sacred words are sparked: *these* allow them to leap like flames and, like crystals, to scatter light. And they demand a pause, an intake of breath. A measured breathing is essential to the writing of calligraphy, which is also a form of rigorous choreography. Breath punctuates and enlivens a text whose initial impulse, after all, *was* breath. The pauses are windows also, by means of which we are invited to dream, to, in the words of Gaston Bachelard, be more "vividly alive." He is evoking poetic leaps of mind, a process essential to the reception of new ideas and novel connections, what the Kabalists call *skipping and jumping.* The word for vowel sounds in Arabic is *harakât,* which also means "movement."

Like the mazed halls and galleries of a museum, the calligraphic itineraries I have described impose a way of proceeding and are all about the unfolding of knowledge. They offer a practice of seeing, and the promise of far-seeing. This parallel between the museum and the sacred text also informs the novel I am writing, as do those emblems so dear to Italo Calvino: the flame and the crystal.

◆

Situated in the Jardin des Plantes, Paris's oldest mineralogy museum was not conceived as a cabinet of curiosities, but as a place of scientific inquiry. Its collections are extensive—1,509 examples of tourmaline alone! The name Jardin des Plantes is misleading, as the entire garden is even now a research center claiming a number of distinct buildings, housing laboratories, and collections essential to the study of the natural sciences. It also continues to be one of the few places in Paris that, despite the congestion and conquest of so-called free marketeering, continues to enchant the senses and offer the lyrical coincidences once so beloved of the city's Surrealists. I was there just last month researching a new novel; it was late December; in another hour I would run into a glass door and break my nose. The pollarded trees signaled — in Koranic Kufic — the fingers of coral that were about to greet me.

That afternoon I saw what seemed to be fossil flowerets of

cauliflower but were in fact a mineral labeled “Barytine”; an obsidian mirror that belonged to Montezuma — the very mirror that failed to warn him of the dangers about to submerge him; and I was dwarfed by a crystal of salt.

My novel is narrated by a professor of mineralogy whose particular fascination is image stones, stones that appear to contain landscapes and figures and even fragments of calligraphy. I had read Roger Caillois:

The fact is that there is no creature or thing, no monster or monument, no happening or sight in nature, history, parable, or dream whose image the predisposed eye cannot read in the markings, patterns, and outlines found in stones.

Already, I had described the image stones from Caillois’s collection, things I had seen in photographs only. Unexpectedly, I found them on display in a cabinet in the museum’s Great Hall — the very same stones Caillois named “Calligraphy” or “Royal Calligraphy.” In other words, I found myself face to face with the very same stones that had enchanted my novel’s narrator:

These appear to be traced over with a reed pen dipped in cream. What’s more, each stone could well exemplify a particular style of classical Arabian calligraphy: Naskhi, Riga, Thuluth. One can even make out certain letters: the vertical *alif,* the horizontal *jim.* The perfect proportions sought after by the scribes are in evidence, as are the sparks that are said to set the words on fire.

As when a dream snake, biting its tail, revealed the structure of benzene to the chemist Kekulé, the dream released something that was sleeping in the chemist’s mind all along. As when the lover of a Berber girl licks the symbolic text that is tattooed upon her breast, and swallowing, embodies and releases the alphabet of desire. An alphabet that, like the letters of the sun’s illumination, is sacred, eternal, and profoundly human.

# *Notes*

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